



## Original Research

# A House of Many Stories: The Gibson House Museum and Narratives of Inclusion and Exclusion

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**Abstract:** The Gibson House Museum, located in Boston's Back Bay neighborhood, has a significant track record of acknowledging and incorporating LGBTQ history into its programs, presentations, and tours. Yet this history is complex. The museum, a kind of Victorian time capsule, was founded by Boston poet Charles Hammond Gibson Jr. (1874–1954) in the mid-twentieth century as a literary monument and shrine to himself; however, family members and the early board of directors were never really comfortable with Gibson's eccentricity and sexual identity and in the early years sought to "eradicate his problematic presence" from the museum's collections, tours, and presentations. Reckoning with the museum's engagement and disengagement with issues of race and class is still an open question. By the end of the twentieth century, the museum began to explore and incorporate LGBTQ history, as well as race, class, and gender, into its interpretive framework. Yet the narratives the museum has crafted to engage audiences and express its own history and identity reveal ongoing tensions within the institution as a social, cultural, and ideological space. These interlaced narratives, backchannel negotiations, pregnant silences, and even shadow stories were often implied or insinuated rather than stated directly. In particular, reckoning with the museum's engagement and/or disengagement with issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality is still somewhat tentative and very much an open question. Blending critical museology and interdisciplinary history and contextualizing the museum and its founder, this essay explores the dialectics of inclusion and exclusion that inform and yet fragment the museum's self-fashioning and ongoing reimagining.

**Keywords:** *House Museums, Gibson House Museum, Literary Museums, Gay and Lesbian History, LGBTQ History, Narrativity, Strategies of Engagement*

## Introduction

Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive!

—Sir Walter Scott (1808) 1888

The Gibson House Museum at 137 Beacon Street in Boston has been called an "intact Back Bay relic preserved in Victorian amber," "a Victorian secret," "an eccentric's obsession," and "the museum that nobody knows." To this, we could add "the museum that dares not speak its name," to echo Oscar Wilde, because its colorful founder, Charles Hammond Gibson Jr. (1874–1954), is said to have been "a great character" and "a great bohemian" (Witowski 2000, G1), whose homosexuality embarrassed his family and made the museum's early board members so uneasy that they deliberately attempted to downplay traces of the founder in the museum's collections and displays. Gibson was a minor poet, literary lecturer, and popular travel writer, an eccentric Boston character known for his Brahmin accent, raccoon coat (de rigueur in Brahmin circles), and bathtub gin martinis during prohibition. He published

volumes of traditionalist poetry in limited editions and irreverent travel books about the countryside and architecture of France in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He was a lighthearted humorist who enjoyed travel and gardening. From the 1930s until his death in 1954, Gibson transformed his family home into a Victorian Museum, literary shrine, and monument to himself as a New England poet and travel writer. However, the founding board of directors and trustees, which included family members, were so uneasy with Gibson's eccentricity and sexual identity that they sought to "eradicate his problematic presence" from the museum's collections, tours, and presentations. This essay explores the dialectics of inclusion and exclusion that inform yet impede the museum's self-fashioning and reimagining, advocating for a restoration of the museum's literary history and identity, which is, of course, inextricably connected to Charles Gibson himself. The museum and the man are halves of a whole—or should be. This reconstituted perspective, like bringing an antique stereopticon gradually into focus, adds depth and dimensionality to the museum's origin story and, in the process, opens a window into the cultural history of literary Boston.

My method here is interdisciplinary, blending microhistory, literary archeology, textual studies, gay and lesbian studies, narratology, critical museology, and the history of the book. Although the present intervention focuses on the Gibson House Museum in the first half of the nineteenth century, the conclusions apply to all house museums and a variety of small museums, historical sites, and archives, especially those that project or conceal a queer identity. Although this study is highly localized, the theme of stories and silences can and has been applied to museums of all kinds, ancient and modern.

While the natural impulse may be to refine a museum's story and to smooth out rough edges and contradictions,<sup>1</sup> I argue that more narrative complexity, not less, can help small museums like the Gibson House extend their interpretive range, engage a wider variety of audiences, and build stronger relationships with stakeholders. Museum professionals, emphasizing reflective practice and increasingly sensitive to the rhetorical and literary possibilities of creative storytelling, have pointed to the power of narratives to engage audiences (Lowe 2015), to foster culturally inclusive practices (Jung 2016), and to enrich interpretation (Goswami 2018). This is especially relevant in the case of the Gibson House, a museum founded by a poet who wished, more than anything, to honor his own literary legacy. Yet the museum has historically recast itself without its affable narrator and main protagonist—or relegated him to minor roles and cameo appearances.<sup>2</sup> In some respects, this

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<sup>1</sup> This has been my own observation and experience in twenty-plus year of association with the museum as a scholar and, at the time of this writing, a Gibson House Museum board member. I resigned from the board in October 2023, after completing a three-year term.

<sup>2</sup> Qazvini and Hessami (2018, 21–35) explore analogous themes in their essay, "The Role of Literary Texts in Interpretations by Museum Audiences." Significantly, Gibson House programming in recent years has incorporated queer themes, albeit from a present-oriented perspective, while remaining more circumspect about the literary history of the museum and its founder. The museum, according to present staff members, has also sought out openly gay board members.

essay makes visible the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion among the stakeholders and decision makers of the museum over time. Yet this plot thread cannot be disentangled from Charles Gibson's life and work as a literary figure, the history of which has been neglected and, at times, intentionally censored and obscured.

By the end of the twentieth century, the museum, with some external prompting and investigative research by myself and others, began to explore and incorporate LGBTQ history, as well as race, class, and gender, into its interpretive framework. Yet the narratives the museum has crafted to express its own history and identity and to engage audiences reveal ongoing tensions within the institution as a social, cultural, and ideological space. Interlaced narratives, backchannel negotiations, pregnant silences, and even shadow stories—narratives that are implied or insinuated rather than stated directly (Abbott 2008)—raise, among other things, important questions about narratives, truth-telling, and ethics (Phelan 2007). In particular, reckoning with the museum's engagement and/or disengagement with issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality is still somewhat tentative and very much an open question.



Figure 1: Exterior Shot of the Gibson House Museum, 138 Beacon Street, Boston, with Prominent Rainbow Flags

The Gibson House Museum, a five-story brownstone in Boston's historic Back Bay neighborhood, was originally the site of Charles Gibson's family home. The Gibsons also had a summer house, Forty Steps, in Nahant, the exclusive North Shore community where Gibson spent time writing poetry and cultivating an extensive rose garden, which he occasionally opened for public tours, in the manor of the du Ponts of Delaware but on a smaller scale. The Beacon Street brownstone was designed by architect Edward Clarke Cabot (1818–1901) and constructed in 1859 to 1960 (Seiberling 1991). Gibson envisioned his museum as a “literary shrine of the life of a New England writer, in the setting of a family background representative of the history, culture, and standards of Boston during the last

half of the Nineteenth and early decades of the Twentieth centuries.” In 1938, Gibson predicted that “by the year 2000, a Victorian House Museum would be a unique, a very important institution.” Offering a glimpse of Victorian domestic life, Gibson’s museum would demonstrate “the manner in which a typical family lived at that time, and their principles of character, good citizenship, and taste in living” (Seiberling 1991, ii–iii). The museum officially opened its doors to the public in 1957, soon after Gibson’s death at the age of 80, as specified in his will.<sup>3</sup>

The Gibson House was founded on a paradox: a museum designed to enshrine the life and work of a Boston writer whose presence the Gibson Society, the museum’s governing body, wished to suppress. In his later years, a period marked by loneliness and poor health, Gibson was fond of referring to himself as a “disembodied spirit.” With a twinkle in his eye, he would intrigue his listeners with his otherness and other-worldliness: “Often I think of myself as Renaissance and then again as Greek or Eastern.” In the same breath, he would playfully boast about his wealth, privilege, and ability to scorn public appearances or, conversely, to project his identity and public persona: “I was born an individualist and I could afford to be. I don’t care what people think. I go to social affairs only when I wish to and never because I think I must.”<sup>4</sup> The initial project of the Gibson House Museum after Gibson’s death was, then, to transform a “queer space” memorializing the life of a Boston eccentric into an “authentic” Victorian time capsule and stage set and, in a sense, to exorcise Charles Gibson’s “disembodied spirit.” This ambivalence continues to the present moment. On the one hand, the Gibson House Museum has genuinely embraced Gibson’s personal history and identity; at a recent Program Committee meeting, for example, a board member, supported by staff members, proposed establishing a literary prize honoring LGBTQ writers and allies. On the other hand, some board members, influenced by the concerns of family members, fear the prospect of the Gibson House becoming a “gay museum.” Precisely what a gay museum might be has never been fully expressed.

## The Gibson House Museum as a Queer Space

The Gibson House’s founding director, Mrs. Marjory Drake Ross (1901–1997), procured objects for the museum, supervised renovations, and played up its house-beautiful aspect. Photo-documentation from the early years of the museum indicates that “objects and furniture [were] rearranged or replaced without exactly duplicating the original appearance.” According to a 1991 self-study, the Gibson Society,...had no coherent policy for collections

<sup>3</sup> Henry Francis du Pont had turned his house into a museum in 1951. See the Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library website: <https://www.winterthur.org/history-of-the-garden/>.

<sup>4</sup> Gibson’s intonation and wry sense of humor were captured in an audio recording archived at the Woodbury Poetry Room at Harvard University of Gibson toward the end of his life, reading (and clearly enjoying) a newspaper article reviewing his literary career by Lawrence Dame of the *Boston Herald* (1950, 44).

and consistently “vacillated in its interpretation.” The study’s author, Catherine L. Seiberling, comments, “It is also clear that there have been deliberate and admitted attempts to downplay the problematic presence of [Charles Hammond Gibson, Jr.] in the museum.” Seiberling (1991, Book 2, 43) continues, “Mrs. Ross has said in her own words that an attempt was made to ‘eradicate’ [Gibson’s] presence from the house.” The use of the word eradicate by Ross is significant given the context of 1950s America, when homosexuality was frequently defined as a mental illness. Ross is known to have referred to Gibson—in exasperated whispers, no doubt—as “that little faggot.” In personal correspondence, family members at times fretted about the “Charlie Problem” when discussing issues related to the disposition of the estate and the embarrassing publicity and social gossip a gay relative could engender as he planned a very public museum to honor his own literary legacy.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 2: Foyer of the Gibson House Museum

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Sam Duncan, family member and former President of the Board of Directors, for generously sharing sensitive family letters and lore with me.

Other more troubling shadow stories<sup>6</sup> were buried deep in personal correspondence and living memory:

- Charlie consults his cousin and confidant, Lady Edith Russell Playfair (1855–1932), who had married Sir Lyon Playfair (1819–1998), the first Baron Playfair of Saint Andrews, in 1878, about a European affair, “a lust,” and vicious gossip about him back in Boston.<sup>7</sup>
- Charlie is one of the gay male aesthetes connected to the tightly knit group surrounding the audacious art collector and museum founder, Isabella Stuart Gardner (1840–1924).
- Charlie is a frequent guest at Beauport in Gloucester, Massachusetts, the personal retreat and showplace of Henry Davis Sleeper (1878–1934), a gay antiquarian and collector who, with his longtime partner, Harvard economist Abram Piatt Andrew (1873–1936), was the center of one of the interlocking queer social circles in the region. Andrew and Sleeper exchange enthusiastic erotic missives about young Gibson’s personality and good looks.<sup>8</sup>
- Charlie begins to receive a series of insinuating postcards from an unbalanced associate, Thurlow Field Collier (1905–1983), which seem to imply blackmail.<sup>9</sup>
- Charlie employs a series of male servants, one of whom, Frankie, refers to him as “Sire,” and there are whisperings that these men may have served as procurers for him.
- Charlie makes an unwanted advance to a young male visitor after locking a door in an unnamed room, apparently making the youth very uneasy, and the story floats through time via family lore.

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<sup>6</sup> I am extending the term “shadow stories,” building on its technical, narratological sense—stories that are often incomplete, indirect, or subliminal (Abbott 2008, 182–183)—to denote, in the context of small museums and house museums, the following: narrative fragments from personal papers and founding documents; strong circumstantial evidence pointing to underlying stories; stories surfaced by mining historical newspapers and public records; stories partially erased or obscured through the deaccession and replacement of artifacts; family lore and residual sentiment expressed through gestures, conversational tone, inside jokes, and irony; and assumptions half-expressed through circumlocution.

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix A.

<sup>8</sup> I am indebted to art historian Tripp Evans’ research into the Sleeper-Andrew correspondence regarding Charles Hammond Gibson, Jr.

<sup>9</sup> Thurlow F. Collier’s life trajectory parallels that of Charles Gibson. By his own admission, he had previously sent “libelous and dunning postcards through the mails,” a federal offense, to his father, Arthur L. Collier (1879–1977), and was sentenced jail time. The probation report read to the court at his sentencing noted that he had been “spoiled by his mother in his youth, “went to private school and college, and upon his mother’s death, inherited most of the old Peabody Mansion in Beverly, where he has lived alone on a small income.” Collier claimed that “he had been hostile and vindictive because of the supposed ‘injustice’ done him (*Boston Globe* 1942b, 10). His scholarly diction in court was frequently confused by emotional outbursts as he pleaded for another chance” (*Boston Globe* 1942b, 10). Collier later turned up in the local Beverly newspapers after being arrested in the vicinity of a Newport, Rhode Island Navy base for “obscenity” (*Boston Globe* 1942a, 3). Collier’s coded postcards to Gibson are among his personal papers in the manuscript collection of the Gibson House Museum, Boston, Massachusetts. In May of 1955, Collier’s mansion in Beverly, Massachusetts, worth \$50,000, burned to the ground while Collier was away (*Boston Globe* 1955, 1).

Finally, there are family tales of Charlie entertaining a motley cast of characters in the house, single (or virtually single) men, all with their own eccentric backstories. One notable example was Baron Frary von Blomberg [born William Theobald Frary], a Boston “playboy” and press agent “who was adopted in 1933 by a rich, elderly spinster,” 71-year-old Baroness Maria Adelheid von Blomberg (1863–1949) of Germany. Frary took the title of Baron (*Detroit Free Press* 1936, 5) and later married the Baroness’ friend from Boston, a wealthy, 65-year-old widow, Mrs. Frederick E. Snow (Lillian Henrietta “Lilly” Snow).<sup>10</sup> At one time, Frary had been a great admirer of Adolf Hitler and served as a PR man for Hitler’s Germany as well as the socialist/nationalist Armenian Revolutionary Federation, the Dashnaksutyun.<sup>11</sup> These shadow stories, narrative fragments signifying well beyond their literal meaning, were part and parcel of life for gay men of Gibson’s social class and visibility. The ways in which Gibson crafted his public persona, and their queer materialization in his museum, should be seen in this context. To survive and thrive in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Boston, gay men in the public eye had to be proficient, as was Bella Gardner herself, in “the art of scandal” (Shand-Tucci 1989).

As a cultural archive, the Gibson House clearly bears the traces of censorship—an occasional razor-cut manuscript, for example—but chiefly in the form of absences apparent when collections are viewed as a whole.<sup>12</sup> Ross’ attempts to edit the archive were more or less

<sup>10</sup> “Cupid Winks at Years” (*Journal and Courier* 1936, 17). See also, “Rich Boston Dowager to Wed Youth” (*Daily Oklahoman* 1936, 4).

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, Baroness Maria Adelheid von Blomberg was the cousin of German Lieutenant General and Minister of Defense, Werner Von Blomberg (1878–1946), for a time Adolph Hitler’s right-hand man, and responsible for Germany’s military build-up leading to WWII. In a letter from 1934, Frary described his meeting with Werner Von Blomberg in Berlin and his first encounter with Hitler himself. Frary was dazzled by the Lieutenant General, now his cousin: “Tall, slim, every inch a member of the aristocratic Prussian officer caste, he made a profound impression on me. He stood up and looked at me through a monocle. Speaking English, he asked me about my foster mother. The thing I liked best about him was that, with great courtesy and tact, he refrained from commenting upon the combination of circumstances which had brought me into his family. He was sizing me up, in fact, and on the whole, I believe, I didn’t come out badly.” The following day, Frary was introduced to another new relative, Baron Oswald Ludwig Pohl (1892–1951), who started his career as a German SS functionary but became, during the Nazi era, the head of the SS Main Administrative Office and head administrator of the Nazi concentration camps. He stood trial in 1947, was convicted of crimes against humanity, and was finally executed in 1951. Frary recalled, “The next day, Baron von Pohl took me to see Hitler, with whom I shook hands. A day or two later, I went to Dauchau, where I spent several days sampling German country life. Such was my introduction to my new life. That I shall like it and adapt myself to it I am quite sure, but my American citizenship still holds good and every year I shall look forward to the months I shall spend in the United States” (William Branham Historical Research, n.d.). See also, Wachsmann (2015), Wistrich (1995), and *Miami Herald* (1950, 12). Frary was so well-connected that when he returned from Germany to the United States in August of 1934, he was among the first to report that the popularity of Dr. Paul Joseph Goebbels, “the Reich Propaganda Minister and one of Chancellor Hitler’s chief aides,” was waning and that he could soon be replaced (*New York Times* 1934, 5; see also, *Boston Globe* 1942c, 55).

<sup>12</sup> Institutional censorship—or scrubbing—has occurred regularly at the Gibson House Museum up to the present moment, through the deaccession and replacement of artifacts, although this process has been largely unconscious. For example, Charles Gibson loved prize fighting, as did his mentor, Isabella Stewart Gardner, and hung semi-nude (shirtless) photographs of the African American heavyweight champion Joe Lewis (1914–1981), the “Brown

successful; when I discovered the Gibson House in 2001, no one associated with the museum had even read Gibson's work. He had become a kind of inside joke, occasionally surfacing in the historical record, as in this passing reference in the groundbreaking book, *Improper Bostonians: Lesbian and Gay History from the Puritans to Playland*. The authors, the History Project collective, described Gibson in comic terms as "a denizen of Beacon Street in the Back Bay" and "a minor poet and author" who regarded himself as a designer and frequent guest at Henry Davis Sleeper's estate, Beauport, a well-known gathering place for gay aesthetes.<sup>13</sup> The description continues:

For a time, he served as Boston Parks Commissioner and was responsible for the architecture of the Beaux Arts-style "comfort station" on the Boston Common.<sup>14</sup> His own home has been preserved as a shrine to late-Victorian taste and style. Gibson, who employed a series of young, working-class men as his live-in servants, was said to have upset his prudish neighbors by appearing about the neighborhood in silk pajamas. (History Project 1998, 94)

Although this thumbnail sketch was fairly accurate, it created an unfortunate caricature by emphasizing Gibson's campy flamboyance and by implying homoerotic liaisons with male domestics.<sup>15</sup> The innuendo, colorful language, and cultural gossip that made *Improper Bostonians* so engaging as a public history text obscured Gibson's conservatism, literary dedication, and visionary qualities—in a word, his complexity as a cultural figure.

A more official profile can be found in Mildred Buchanan Flagg's *Boston Authors Now and Then, More Members of the Boston Authors Club, 1900–1966* (1966). Flagg describes Gibson in rather ordinary terms, with a flat affect, and with only very subtle clues about his identity: he was a poet, traveler, and popular lecturer; he was educated at private schools, in Boston and later, at St. Paul's School in New Hampshire; in 1894, he was secretary to Lord Northcliff (Alfred Harmsworth) in England, assisting in organizing the Jackson-Harmsworth Polar Expedition; he studied at MIT and became an authority on French architecture, especially in the region of Touraine; he joined the Boston Author's Club in 1903; and he was in the real

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Bomber," in the back staircase of the Gibson House (Gibson privately rhapsodized over Joe Louis), and an endearing photo of the Vienna Boys Choir, for whom he composed and published a musical anthem, hung in his study or library. These photos were removed from public display, perhaps lost, and deemed "possibly apocryphal" by museum staff members—until I sent them photos that I had taken myself twenty years earlier.

<sup>13</sup> Another interconnected gay circle, at Harvard University, as Martin Green (1989) has so insightfully elucidated, revolved around George Santayana, the gifted art collector and connoisseur Bernard Berenson (1865–1959), and Edward "Ned" Perry Warren (1860–1928), author of the quirky gay opus, *A Defense of Uranian Love* (1928–1930). Harvard had its own homosexual scandal, crisis, and purge in the 1920s. See Shand-Tucci (2003).

<sup>14</sup> The "comfort station" on the Boston Common was known, locally and humorously, as "the Pink Palace," according to Edward Gordon, former president of the Gibson Society and the Boston Victorian Society. Gordon added, with a smile, "it is said that Gibson constructed it so that he could *cruise* in style."

<sup>15</sup> In fact, Gibson was a hyper-conservative dresser, preferring to wear Victorian suits long after they had gone out of fashion.



estate and investment business in Boston. Gibson worked as Parks Commissioner in the administration of Boston Mayor James Michael Curley (1874–1958) from 1914 to 1916 (perhaps in lieu of serving in the Great War); he was a member of the Massachusetts Prison Reform League and many other patriotic, social, and civic groups; and “he belonged to the Poetry Society, the Foreign Policy Association, the Audubon Society, the Horticulture Society, and the Japan Society.” Flagg noted that “Mr. Gibson was the author of *Two Gentlemen in Touraine*, under his pseudonym ‘Richard Sudbury,’” and that, in addition to his popular travel books and volumes of poetry, Gibson penned “The Prisoner’s Hymn,” “At Lincoln Memorial,” and edited American Poetry Association *Yearbooks* and *The Reminiscences of Annie Crowninshield Warren*. Flagg (1966, 116) concluded, “Mr. Gibson never married. In the winter he lived on Beacon Street in Boston, but in the summer he resided in Nahant, by the sea. He died November 17, 1954.”

## A Bachelor’s Obsession

The Gibson House is inextricably connected to Gibson’s complex identity as a gay man, an identity that evolved from the 1890s to the 1950s—from dandy poet to dashing clubman; from bachelor aesthete to drawing room literary mandarin; and from politically engaged extrovert to reclusive eccentric. At a basic level, Gibson’s decision to create a Victorian Museum was countercultural. The dominant trend in historic preservation in the 1930s, one led chiefly by upper-class White women, was to recapture, preserve, and restage Colonial-era domesticity (West 1999). An inveterate contrarian, Gibson insisted that “by the year 2000 a Victorian House Museum would be a unique, a very important institution” (Seiberling 1991, ii). Gibson’s choice of the Victorian period was significant for another reason. Even though he lived most of his life after 1901, he chose to “enshrine” himself as man of letters squarely within a nineteenth-century context. This was an opportunity to choose his peers and to reimagine the cultural and historical setting for his life and work. A deeply conservative man, Gibson responded to the formality and order he associated with the Victorian period. Preferring the company of men, Gibson may have found comfort and breathing room in the homosocial worlds of nineteenth-century Boston, especially prior to the obscenity trials of Oscar Wilde in the spring of 1895, which signaled a repressive cultural shift in attitudes toward homosexuality.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, Gibson, now in his early thirties, was reaching his literary peak. As the Victorian Era became an increasingly distant memory, Gibson’s dandyism, frequent dining out in hotels, and same-sex socializing struck his Back Bay neighbors as peculiar and unsettled his family. His father, Charles Hammond Gibson Sr. (1836–1919), eventually distanced himself from his son and namesake, undoubtedly one of the many veiled sorrows of the younger man’s life. Charlie and his mother, Rosamond, were very close, and he seemed to be emotionally drawn to maternal figures, such as his cousins Edith Russell Lady Playfair (1848–1932) and Mary Ann Palfrey Russell (1826–1918).



Figure 3: Charles Hammond Gibson with Cousin Mary Ann Palfrey Russell, c. 1890, and the Famous Topsy the Cat, in the Drawing Room of Her Residence at 72 Beacon Street, Boston, Massachusetts

*Source: with permission from the Boston Athenaeum*

Although his family seems to have lost patience with his bachelor lifestyle and refusal to marry, Gibson was not unusual in this regard. The period from 1890 to 1930 represents the peak years of a thriving bachelor subculture in America. It was quite common for unmarried men to establish intense, affectionate ties with male friends. Such ties were emotional and sustaining, as historian Howard Chudacoff points out. "In 1890, Boston contained 74,112 unmarried men; 63,031 were between fifteen and thirty-four...Boston's young bachelor population equaled the total population of Lynn, Massachusetts" (Chudacoff 2000, 184).

The queerness of the Gibson House Museum as a historically reconstituted domestic space lies in the uneasy juxtaposition of normative upper-class domesticity, gay subcultures, and the flourishing bachelor subculture of institutions, organizations, and interpersonal social associations that Chudacoff so carefully delineates.

Bachelors, more than married people, blended the two spheres by making their public, non-familial peer group and other associations into quasi families and by carrying on their personal affairs in mostly public places such as boarding houses, saloons, the streets, clubhouses, and the like. Without a home that they themselves headed and could call their own, bachelors created a world for themselves that counteracted the potentialities for social isolation. (Chudacoff 2000, 184)

For two years (1914–1916), Gibson served as Parks and Recreation Commissioner of Boston under the administration of Mayor James Michael Curley and somehow became embroiled in a controversy over a plan for a public restroom on Flagstaff Hill on Boston Common. The “Comfort Station” that Gibson collaborated on and actively promoted, executed by the firm of Desmond and Lord in 1915, was a more or less direct copy of the Music Pavilion in the gardens of the Petit Trianon at Versailles. Desmond, an instructor at MIT who trained at the L’Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, attempted to “harmonize in architectural lines and in color of stone with the Parkman Bandstand” (Seiberling 1991, 22). The Boston Society of Architects, Ralph Adams Cram presiding, protested the plan in 1916 because the building, as proposed by the Parks and Recreation Department, would be “larger than the limit by law of 600 square feet,” that it would be constructed of a coarse material (cast stone or imitation granite), that it would be in a conspicuous location (Flagstaff Hill), and that it would be an “impropriety to copy one of the most elegant architectural monuments of the past for the purpose of a public urinal.”<sup>16</sup> Gibson’s plan for a public restroom, modeled after a Baroque Music Pavilion frequented by Marie Antionette, fits David Hilliard’s notion of camp and homosexual style: “camp,” Hilliard suggests, “in its meaning of ‘elegantly ostentatious’ or ‘affected display,’ was a prominent attribute of the homosexual style as it developed in England from the 1890s onwards” (Hilliard 1982, 272). Significantly, Gibson chose an austere Baroque model with pink toning added to soften the building’s neoclassical severity. This aesthetic skirmish between the Parks and Recreation Commission and the Board of Art Commissioners, adjudicated by the Boston Society of Architects, played out in the public press: the “pink granite” comfort station was proclaimed “Folly in High Places” and “Our Hill Crowning Atrocity,” more appropriate to an architectural museum than to a democratic public space. Gibson defended his design in aesthetic and historical terms but compromised on location and scale.<sup>17</sup> Mayor Curley (1957) stood by him, and Gibson’s eccentric aesthetic vision would finally triumph.

Charles Gibson clearly inhabited many social worlds, but bachelorhood is certainly a dominant theme in his life and work, one that became darker and more sardonic as he grew older and as loneliness and social isolation increasingly became a day-to-day reality. Consider the subterranean imagery and enclosed spaces of Gibson’s humorous poem, “The Hermit Crabs,” written in 1945:

<sup>16</sup> Douglass Shand-Tucci in *Built in Boston* (1999), quips, “Just which historical model might have been more appropriate does not seem to have been considered.” See also *Boston Globe* (1916, 16).

<sup>17</sup> The structure was placed on lower ground, and the symmetrical extensions, or “wings,” that Gibson intended for equipment storage were eliminated to reduce the structure’s overall footprint.

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We are the hermits; the celibates we,  
Without wives, without servants that serve,  
(And that only un-nerve),  
Without help that helps not,  
And is only a blot,  
When it's tied to the family tree.<sup>18</sup>

The tendency within the bachelor subculture to invert public and private spheres, I think, puts Gibson's act of making a public museum out of his family home into perspective. Gibson's museum, his life, and work open up possibilities for grounded storytelling and creative inquiry—exploring, for example, the fragility and fluidity of the American family home as a historical construction, literary trope, and cultural symbol. The Gibson House Museum, part literary shrine and part Victorian domestic stage, is nothing if not a queer space, “a space of difference,” to echo architectural historian Aaron Betsky, “where one realizes that desire is not biological destiny, and neither is [one's] social role” (Betsky 1995, quoted in Murphy 2009, 192).<sup>19</sup>

### Charles Hammond Gibson Jr., as a Queer Travel Writer

When he published *Two Gentlemen in Touraine* in 1899, Charles Gibson was just 24 years old, a young man with talent, of refined sensibility, and an entrepreneurial spirit. His family, perhaps concerned about his vacillating direction in life, urged him to become an engineer of some kind, and so they sent him off to MIT, then called Boston Tech, located in the Back Bay, very close to home. Gibson would later recall that he resisted such a utilitarian path. They wanted to make an engineer out of him, he later recalled, but he forged his own path. “I wanted only to create beauty, and, through my verse and my garden, I think I've done that” (Dame 1950, 44). Gibson's decision to become a transatlantic bachelor poet, however, created tension at home, especially with his father. Although somewhat mitigated by a close and loving relationship with his mother, Rosamond Warren Gibson (1846–1934), this intergenerational tension would come to define his life in significant ways. This psychic tension was not unique to Gibson. A similar dynamic of intra-familial conflict would play out with other gay men of Gibson's generation in legal struggles over inheritance and, in some cases, disinheritance.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Charles Hammond Gibson Jr., personal papers, manuscript collection of the Gibson House Museum, Boston, Massachusetts. For the full poem, see Appendix B.

<sup>19</sup> See also *Queer Space* (Betsky 1997).

<sup>20</sup> Consider the interesting case of J. Arthur Beebe, who bequeathed \$1,000,000 to Harvard University. Upon his passing, Beebe left his bachelor son, Charles Philip Beebe, his only living descendant, “a large pearl stick pin and a blue mantel clock” (*Boston Globe* 1914, 8). Charles Gibson assisted Charles Philip Beebe in successfully suing his father's estate; Gibson,

In 1894, when he was about 20, Gibson began to write *Two Gentlemen in Touraine*, a lighthearted but sophisticated book about the historic and picturesque French Royal Chateaux of Touraine. Gibson published the first edition in 1899 under the pen name Richard Sudbury. In selecting this pen name, Gibson was referencing the location of Longfellow's Wayside Inn, which he'd previously visited.<sup>21</sup> As Gibson later explained in a 1907 lecture on the Art of Poetry, "Longfellow was the epic poet of America, and the central poetic figure of our history.... Longfellow sang of the homely lives of his fellow countrymen, of their firesides and their patriotism. His poems dwell in the hearts of the people who do not understand the greater poets."<sup>22</sup> The 1899 edition was a lovely volume, elegantly bound with thick gilt-edged pages, aesthetic printing, and striking illustrations.<sup>23</sup> *Two Gentlemen in Touraine* was a popular success, so much so that two additional editions were published under his own name in 1906 in London and New York, including an "Automobile Edition," designed for the steady waves of international tourists now motoring through the French countryside, as the *Washington Times* (1906, 6) and other journals noted.

*Two Gentlemen in Touraine*, which is, among other things, an extended dialogue between the narrator and a fictitious French nobleman, displays a precociousness and technical sophistication beyond Gibson's years at the time of writing. This likely reflects the influence of a more mature and cosmopolitan collaborator, a silent partner and countervoice, Maurice Mauny-Talvande (1866–1941), also known as the Count de Mauny, whom Gibson first met in Europe in 1894. The book is obviously based on this relationship, with author Richard Sudbury, the narrator, standing in for Gibson and the character Comte de Persigny for Count de Mauny.

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in turn, sued Charles Philip for failing to pay Gibson's commission (*Boston Globe* 1918, 15). When Beebe began to actively seek what he perceived as his birthright, his family had him involuntarily committed to McLean Hospital, a psychiatric hospital that, in the twentieth century, serviced the affluent. It was founded in 1816 as an "Asylum for the Insane."

<sup>21</sup> Hilary Iris Lowe (2019, 44–69), interestingly, views the Longfellow House-Washington's Headquarters through a "queer lens" in her article, "The Queerest House in Cambridge," an important intervention. See also, Will Fellows (2004).

<sup>22</sup> Gibson's lectures were covered in detail in local newspapers. This excerpt from the *Boston Globe* (1907, 4) is only one example.

<sup>23</sup> The following notice, from the *Buffalo Commercial* (1900, 9) was typical of the praise given to the book's physical appearance (rather than its content): "The book is written by an enthusiast, richly endowed with artistic temperament, and in a style that is in some details very unique and fascinating. But it is in externals that the book is most noticeable. The paper is of the finest quality; every page is beautifully ornamented, and the binding is rich, and the very best in every detail of the binder's art. It is a handsome book for the lover of beautiful books to have within reach, and one of which he will never tire."

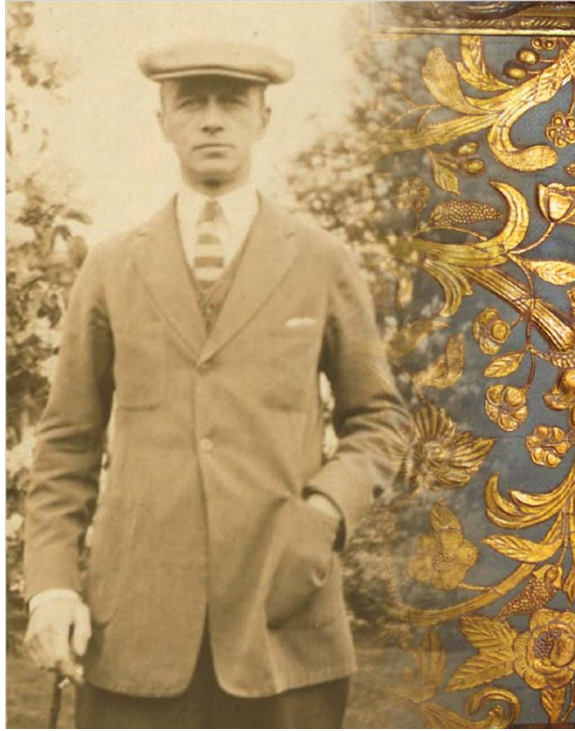


Figure 4: Charles Hammond Gibson Jr., at 40 Steps Nahant, c. 1920. Still Image from the 2006 Shortform Documentary Film, *The Wounded Eros: Remembering Charles Hammond Gibson, Jr. (1875–1954)*, by Todd Gernes and Shun Liang

In my scholarly and creative work on Charles Gibson over two-plus decades,<sup>24</sup> I discovered that he had a lifelong romantic friendship with the self-styled French “Count,” Maurice Mauny-Talvande. Mauny-Talvande married into Queen Victoria’s circle but fled Europe in the 1920s after a homosexual scandal threatened the reputation of his family. Gibson and Mauny-Talvande met in Boston in the early 1890s, collaborated on essays and lectures, and worked, through fundraising and public education, to establish Christian education programs for boys in the south of France. Taking a conservative, monarchist approach, they theorized, “For education when it is not a moral one, one that is built up on moral principles, serves only to awaken in human beings [particularly the peasantry in Europe and the working class in the United States], ambitions which it is and must ever be, impossible to satisfy.” Their solution to the great social problems of the day was an odd combination of reactionary monarchism, noblesse oblige, and cross-class pederastic mentoring through boys’ clubs—in the context of nineteenth-century France, patronages (Weissbach 1989; Marten 2014). Gibson penned in this period an unpublished “Essay on

<sup>24</sup> Museum slide lectures and academic presentations evolved into a short documentary film (2006), *The Wounded Eros: Remembering Charles Hammond Gibson (1874–1954)*, which, in turn, served as an introduction to a two-man dramatic performance. *These Four Walls: A History of a Romantic Friendship*, co-authored with Dr. John Anderson of Emerson College, premiered at the Boston Athenaeum in October of 2007.

Affection,” referencing the idealized, covenantal friendship between the biblical David and Jonathan—a very common “Uranian” literary trope of the period, “that kind of love which is different from other kinds, such as the love of husband and wife, and all loves of one sex for the other, by the term affection which exists between man and man...—truly a most wondrous state,” Gibson mused, “and one which opens into a field of much thought.”<sup>25</sup>

In 1898, Mauny-Talvande married Lady Mary Elizabeth Agnes Byng (1864–1946), daughter of the fourth Earl of Stratford and a maid of honor to Queen Victoria, with whom he had two children, a son and a daughter. The couple maintained close connections to Boston society. Isabella Stewart Gardner, in fact, was honored to be the godmother of their daughter. However, it was an ill-fated marriage. Mauny-Talvande was entangled in a homosexual scandal related to the establishment of a boarding school for the sons of the British elite in the Château d’Azay-le-Rideau in France, which Mauny-Talvande leased for the purpose. Personal bankruptcy, critical press, and increasing skepticism about his constant social posturing and entrepreneurial confidence games led to a hasty departure from Europe. He fled to a tiny island off the coast of Sri Lanka, which was, according to historian Robert Aldrich ([2014] 2017), a notorious site of homoerotic cultural encounters and sexual tourism from the Victorian period onward, and built a fanciful island estate there called Taprobane, manufactured fine furniture, and became a published authority on tropical gardening.<sup>26</sup> Gibson and Mauny-Talvande would keep up an affectionate correspondence for the rest of their lives.<sup>27</sup>

Richard Sudbury (Gibson) describes old Touraine as an enchanted place, a site of romantic friendships, an intoxicating, homoerotic “fairyland”<sup>28</sup> set apart from the real world and contrasting with the monochromatic cityscape of Puritan Boston. Sudbury/Gibson explored the art, architecture, and social customs of rural France, conjuring an enchanted “fairyland,” a greenwood and pastoral escape route in the gay arcadian literary tradition of the Victorian Era (Norton 2008; Keenaghan 2012). “This maze of cupolas, of domes, of towers, appears more bewildering to us than ever. And we lean against the stone, in an artistic intoxication, so overpowering is it” (Gibson 1906a, 74–75). Gibson’s and Mauny-Talvande’s friendship and close collaboration deepened when Mauny-Talvande returned with Gibson to the United States and subsequently gave a series of popular lectures on French architecture, history, and social customs. At the time, Gibson was about 20; Mauny-Talvande was

<sup>25</sup> Charles Hammond Gibson Jr., personal papers, manuscript collection of the Gibson House Museum, Boston, Massachusetts.

<sup>26</sup> See Mauny-Talvande (1937), a vivid hybrid of horticultural exoticism and personal memoir. For a lighter, peerage-oriented profile of Mauny-Talvande, see Chomet (2002).

<sup>27</sup> Charles Hammond Gibson Jr., personal papers, manuscript collection of the Gibson House Museum, Boston, Massachusetts. Personal correspondence.

<sup>28</sup> I don’t intend to use the words “fairy” or “fairyland” in a pejorative sense. Gibson’s use of language signals a kind of otherness bound up with his own sexual identity, about which he obviously felt deeply conflicted. The words “fairy,” “fairy-like,” “fairy prince,” and “fairyland” are used about thirty-five times in the book—and more in his other volumes of poetry and prose.

approaching 30. Gibson accompanied Mauny-Talvande on his tour, assisting him in preparing his lectures and literary salons, one of which Gibson's mother, Rosamond, graciously sponsored. The two men would soon collaborate on articles, from an ultra-conservative perspective, about moral education in France, historic buildings, and the sociology of modern France. Mauny-Talvande took an archconservative, unabashedly monarchist stance, and Gibson, an elitist drawn to European peerage like a moth to the flame, proved to be a sympathetic sounding board and perhaps more.

We had been attracted to each other, perhaps by the very difference of our temperaments, and had been in one another's society almost constantly for a month. At the end of that time our roads had led us in different directions, and we had parted, not to meet again. But so much interested had we been in various discussions, which we had had upon the social questions of life, that we had opened a correspondence, lasting, almost without a pause, during the years that had since passed. (Gibson 1906a, 4)

*Two Gentlemen in Touraine* can be read as a coded narrative about a gay pilgrimage in the context of the burgeoning of aesthetic tourism and travel in the nineteenth century. Gibson paints an eroticized landscape of image and emotion that explores same-sex desire, a liminal space of touristic fantasy, a never-never land of sensual reverie where peasants and noblemen, happily interdependent, find common ground in a time and place that never really was. Significantly, *Two Gentlemen in Touraine* is the story of a romantic relationship that unfolded just prior to the Oscar Wilde obscenity trials for sodomy in 1895, which had a chilling effect on gay relationships and forced many queer men and women in Europe and America to go more deeply underground. However, for a fleeting moment, before the Wilde trial and before the advent of Freudianism in the early twentieth century, Sudbury/Gibson "exchanged imaginations" with the handsome Comte de Persigny/Count de Mauny, his tall figure "straight and distinctive," his light brown hair falling back in a slight wave from his broad forehead, showing "two large temples that were neither high nor low, but that spoke of a wonderful intelligence behind them," his "deep-set eyes, bearing that indescribable look which we find in all men who have thought much and thought deeply" (Gibson 1906a, 6).

In the elegantly printed pages of *Two Gentlemen in Touraine*, we can discern thinly veiled fragments of autobiography as well as crosscurrents of popular culture: travel and tourism, complex and sometimes ambiguous responses to modernity, and contemporary tastes in reading and intellectual culture. On a more personal level, however, *Two Gentlemen in Touraine* documents a kind of love that was often misunderstood and harshly scorned by society. During one of their extended philosophical dialogues, Sudbury/Gibson reveals to Comte de Persigny/Count de Mauny,



I have often argued in my own mind whether, in the case of such a possible affinity of two minds—such a Platonic friendship, be it in any class of society or life—whether these souls might not become intellectually satisfied with one another, and end by being sufficient to themselves. They would find, it is true, a great contentment in one another’s company. They would have a progressing influence upon one another, which might become, in time, almost sublime, but which, for its very purity and light, the world would certainly misunderstand. (Gibson 1906a, 137)

Comte de Persigny/Count de Mauny, the mentor in the relationship, seems to advise courage and fortitude: “True greatness will never be thoroughly understood until the mind of the world is great enough to realize and to recognize that which is often overlooked, or, as you say, misunderstood” (Gibson 1906a, 137).

As we have seen, *Two Gentlemen in Touraine* tells a lightly veiled autobiographical tale of mentor-apprentice initiation into the transatlantic gay subculture of the 1890s. However, as he matured, Gibson shed the persona of a youth pursuing “untutored” love in Elysian fields and adopted that of an archconservative standing up for tradition and moral rectitude in the shadow of New England’s Watch-and-Ward Society, an institution that engendered the well-worn phrase “Banned in Boston.” A decade later, Gibson published *Among French Inns* (1905), which takes the form of a travel book embedded in a comic novel, a farce, containing a wry parody of Isabella Stuart Gardner and John “Jack” Lowell Gardner Jr. (1837–1898) in the character of Mr. and Mrs. James Blodget Wilton. *Among French Inns* (1905), part of the Little Pilgrimages series of L. C. Page & Company of Boston, went into second impressions, which were produced in inexpensive, portable volumes, convenient for European motor tourism.

In 1936, when he was 62 years old, Gibson motored to southern Florida in an early model car with a male companion to research a new book about the culture and society of the South—a humorous book with a special focus on black Americans (Hoffman 1936).<sup>29</sup> By the time Gibson and his companion motored to Florida, Miami had become an instantly formed “magic city” and had a thriving gay subculture. Among other things, it was a veritable “bachelor’s paradise” (Capó Jr. 2017). For Gibson, it was another pilgrimage to “fairyland.”<sup>30</sup>

Although he was a successful and respected author and lecturer in the early twentieth century, Charles Hammond Gibson Jr. became increasingly overlooked and misunderstood as he grew older and adamantly refused to change with the times. As he suggested in one of his later poems, he preferred to be remembered “...not as I am, with suffering that mars the

<sup>29</sup> Given the intended focus and tone of the book project, not to mention the context of the segregated South, it is perhaps fortuitous that the book never came to fruition. Blackface minstrelsy was wildly popular among all classes in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, and its influence can be discerned here. In fact, according to the *Boston Globe* (1896, 2), Gibson was well established in the culture of amateur theatricals in Boston, beginning from when he was about 10 years old, when he was cast in the play *False Colors*, taking the part of the “negro boy,” likely performed in blackface.

<sup>30</sup> I am echoing the title of Julio Capó Jr.’s thought-provoking book, *Welcome to Fairyland: Queer Miami before 1940* (2017).

countenance and seared with countless scars, / But as I was, a youth of twenty-three, / Fresh-fashioned for the life that was to be, / Full of those wingéd flights among the stars we would adventure to, / Ere fortune bars the way..." (Gibson 1922, 3).

Gibson most certainly accumulated emotional scars during his lifetime, perhaps evidence of tensions within his family and social milieu over his sexual identity—his queerness—and with his cultural persona as a bachelor poet and bon vivant. His was a strategy of retrenchment, like that of other gay men at the turn of the century, creating his own hermetically sealed worlds—a fairy-touched chateau in the French countryside, a book of inward-looking sonnets redolent of the gay pastoral mode, or the house museum and literary shrine that suspended his fleeting youth in Victorian amber.

## Reconstituting a Literary Museum

One of the great ironies of the Gibson House story is that anxiety and ambivalence about Charles Gibson's sexuality triggered a powerful impulse to downplay or even to erase Gibson's "problematic presence" from the museum's self-representations and guiding narratives, even as the museum, more recently, has sought to explore Gibson's LGBTQ past. In the process of erasing and redrawing, intervention, and retrenchment, the Gibson House's origin as a literary museum and Gibson's writerly identity were almost completely suppressed—in spite of constant and not-so-subtle reminders. Consequently, an entire region of rich historical narratives has been shut down or hidden. Outing Gibson has met with less resistance than exploring his literary career and intellectual and ideological contexts. Small museums are complex institutions that tend to be conservative at their very core; those dependent on private philanthropy and small networks of kinship and affiliation are especially sensitive to identity politics and ideological crosscurrents, and these tensions surface in narratives, origin stories, and self-representations. In Gibson's cultural milieu, same-sex desire was still characterized by its "distinctive public/private status, at once marginal and central," with the structure and ambiguous quality of an "open secret" (Sedgwick 1990, 22). During the past twenty years of research on and affiliation with the Gibson House, I have had to constantly challenge the absurd assumption that Charles Hammond Gibson Jr., somehow failed as a writer because he was a closeted gay man in a repressive culture, even though Gibson published extensively and, for his time, was not especially closeted.

Charles Hammond Gibson dedicated his entire adult life to the art of writing as a poet, critic, editor, and literary personality. He published his first poem in the *Boston Evening Transcript* in 1894, at the age of 20, and continued to write poems, travel books, literary articles, plays, and lyrics until his death in 1954, at the age of 80. He headed regional literary societies, gave public readings and lectures, encouraged novice writers, and published

anthologies of verse.<sup>31</sup> In 1906, Gibson published his first book of poetry, *The Spirit of Love and Other Poems* (1906) a comprehensive collection of Gibson's poetic output from 1896, when he was about 22, to 1902, when he was about 28. As a young man, Gibson was most likely trying to come to terms with his sexuality in a challenging social and cultural context, and in his poetry he strove to name and honor a love that, perhaps, he did not yet fully understand: "those who love, yet ne'er have known / Whence their true love hath strangely grown" (Gibson 1906b, 2).

The dominant themes in Gibson's early work are the mystery of passion and desire, unrequited love, poisoned love, social scorn, the danger of scandal, and the criminalization of love, "...strange things that bring this sweet desire, / To draw some other being near the soul" (Gibson 1906b, 5). In these years, Gibson constructed a literary and sexual persona in the tradition of Oscar Wilde, and one can sense the impact on Gibson's writing, in his confessional and sometimes tortured lines, of the 1895 Wilde trial in London for "gross indecency." Many of the poems gathered in *The Spirit of Love* fall squarely within what Rictor Norton and others have called the homosexual pastoral or arcadian tradition, a nexus of literary tropes that includes both classical and modern works, from Theocritus to Greek poets' praise of boys in the gymnasias; from Marcel Proust's languid eroticism to Gerard Manley Hopkins' ballads on boys bathing; and from A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and beyond. *The Spirit of Love* is a thinly veiled spiritual autobiography in verse. Gibson, repurposing his first published poem, from the *Boston Evening Transcript* in 1896, dedicated the book:

To those who love, yet ne'er have known  
 Whence their true love hath strangely grown;  
 To those whose hearts to hear withal  
 Celestial voices sweetly call,  
 From far on high, new thoughts of love,  
 That lift their very souls above;  
 To all who, or sad, or gay,  
 To these I dedicate my lay. (Gibson 1906b, 2)

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<sup>31</sup> Gibson sought and received feedback on his poetry from Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823–1911), who thought the young poet's work had promise but found his quatrains to be sound but wanting in originality. Writing to Gibson in 1907 about *The Spirit of Love and Other Poems*, Higginson provided harsh but valuable technical advice on rhyme, meter, diction, form, and literary influence. "I have been reading your poems with much interest," Higginson began ominously, "and I am a little surprised in both directions—first at the range of social connection & foreign experience they represent—and secondly at a very curious negligence of all precision in rhyming." After providing a number of technical examples, Higginson concluded, "Altogether the book has promise, but is it your utmost work? Pardon my frankness" (Charles Hammond Gibson Jr., personal papers, manuscript collection of the Gibson House Museum, Boston. Correspondence, January 21, 1907).

Two years later, Gibson published a more mature collection, *The Wounded Eros* (1908), a carefully crafted sonnet sequence, with an insightful introduction by the African American poet, literary critic, anthologist, and fellow Bostonian, William Stanley Braithwaite (1878–1962). Braithwaite would eventually become one of the most important black literary figures of his time, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), Langston Hughes (1901–1967), and other key figures of the Harlem Renaissance and literary modernism.<sup>32</sup> With Charles Gibson, Braithwaite shared a love of English Renaissance poetry and tended toward literary conservatism, rather than modernism. In his introductory essay, Braithwaite indirectly referenced Gibson's ambiguous stance as author and narrator of the sonnet sequence, pointing to the precedent established by Sir Philip Sidney, whose poetry epitomized homoerotic expression during the Renaissance, as well as the Greek homoerotic tradition. In case his readers missed the point, Braithwaite underscored that *The Wounded Eros* is “the story of an oblation full of inexplicable shadows” and noted the “detached aspects” of the poems, even as the emotions they portrayed seemed raw, transparent, and close to the surface.

And while, after a close study of these sonnets, I am convinced of their origin in the imagination,—that is to say, there being no likelihood that the story is of any actually known experience,—I am impressed with the note of sincerity which will convince the reader of the poet's serious and honest treatment of his material. (Gibson 1908, xxii)

As Gibson matured, he took on a leadership role in Boston literary society, serving, for example, as president of the American Poetry Association and as editor of its *Year Book of Poems* 1926. In his lectures and editing work, Gibson promoted the great “cultural and educational value of poetry” but, like William Stanley Braithwaite, staked out a conservative and staunchly anti-modernist aesthetic stance.<sup>33</sup> “If we attempt too much,” he warned his readers in his introduction to the 1926 *Year Book*, “either in ‘original sin’ or original virtue, we are more apt to fall to the ground, than if we keep the inspiration of the mind harnessed to reason and good form, rather than allowing liberty to degenerate into license, in our attempts to fly too far afield” (Gibson 1926, vii). In the end, the “original sinners”—imagists such as Amy Lowell and Ezra Pound—won the day, and Gibson became a poet that time forgot.

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<sup>32</sup> Nella Larson, Claud McKay, Jessie Fauset, James Weldon Johnson, Gloria Douglas Johnson, Robert Frost, Edward Arlington Robinson, and Amy Lowell, among others. See Philip Butcher (1972).

<sup>33</sup> Charles Hammond Gibson Jr., took a vehement anti-modernist stance as president of the American Poetry Association, scorning imagism and other experimental modes; he vehemently promoted “the tried and true.” Similarly, the Gibson House Museum is, among other things, a vivid and forthright expression of Bostonian antimodernism, in T. J. Jackson Lears’ (1981) sense of the term.

By 1908, Gibson had shifted, in terms of cultural style, from the hyper-aesthetic mode of Oscar Wilde to the vigorous homoeroticism of Walt Whitman,<sup>34</sup> settling somewhere in between these two poles: “Then bind, fair one, with love thy wounded swain. / Give him thine eyes, but breathe thy soul as well / Into his welcome heart, that beats with pain, / Lest it should have an hapless tale to tell” (Gibson 1908, xxii). Gibson’s poetry can be difficult to access and appreciate for twenty-first-century readers because of its coded language, arcane double-entendres, veiled confessions, exaggerated formalism, and metaphysical eroticism. He was a transitional figure, frozen in time between Edwardian Boston and the advent of literary modernism. However, he was certainly not alone, as he shared common ground with poets such as Henry Harmon Chamberlin (1873–1950), Louise Chandler Moulton (1835–1908), Amy Lowell (1874–1925), Hart Crane (1899–1932), Robert Frost (1874–1963), William Stanley Braithwaite (1878–1962), and, later, S. Foster Damon (1893–1971)<sup>35</sup> and John Brooks Wheelwright (1897–1940). If Amy Lowell’s modernist, imagistic poems were in many ways the antithesis of Gibson’s prescriptive formalism (Rollyson 2013), John Brooks Wheelwright’s masterful *Mirrors of Venus: A Novel in Sonnets*, 1914–1938 (1938) is perhaps the most apt comparison to Gibson’s *The Wounded Eros*.<sup>36</sup> Like Gibson, Wheelwright was born into a prominent Brahmin family, briefly studied architecture at MIT, and would later collaborate with Walker Evans (1903–1975) and Lincoln Kirstein (1907–1996) in photographing Boston-area Victorian architecture for a book project, *American Photographs* (1938). If Wheelwright can be said to have close affinities with the angular modernism of Walker Evans, Gibson was more stylistically aligned with the homoeroticism and decadent aestheticism of American photographer and book designer/publisher F. Holland Day (1864–1933), who also moved within the interlinking circles of bohemian Boston (Jussim 1981; Fanning 2008).

While Gibson’s civic profile as Parks Commissioner, literary tastemaker, statesman, and public intellectual trended steadily to the political and cultural right (he was a Roosevelt-Taft-Harding Republican), Wheelwright, who was bisexual, evolved from Boston Brahmin to Trotskyite socialist modernist (Wald 1983; Scott 1954). Wheelwright’s sonnet sequence looks forward to a more minimalist, precise, and more severe (though still playful) modernism; Gibson, on the other hand, unearths from historical memory a miscellany of sonnets, odes, songs, lines, and fragments—objects for his cabinet of curiosities, seedlings for his lovingly cultivated literary specimen garden. Gibson would publish poems in newspapers and anthologies for the rest of his life. When radio emerged as a mass medium in the 1930s and

<sup>34</sup> Douglass Shand-Tucci (1995) discusses gay cultural styles in the context of late nineteenth-century Boston.

<sup>35</sup> S. Foster Damon’s book of poems, *Tilted Moons* (1929), is an apt comparison in the context of early twentieth-century literary culture.

<sup>36</sup> Thanks to Barton Levi St. Armand for this helpful suggestion.

1940s, Gibson broadcast his poems on Boston's WEEL.<sup>37</sup> He was tireless in his promotion and popularization of poetry as an elevating and viable cultural form.

Toward the end of his literary career, Gibson quipped to a curious listener at one of his many public readings, "My dear lady, I have been writing poems for fifty years. They are like the dropping of pigeons all over the house." His manuscripts overflowed from portfolios, closets, desk drawers, cabinets, drawing rooms, and even toolsheds (Dame 1950). In some ways, Gibson's poetry was closely connected to the domestic spaces he crafted, curated, and inhabited—Gibson House, his "Victorian Museum," and the formal gardens of Forty Steps, Nahant.

Like many traditional poets of his day, Gibson's work is highly context dependent. His poems tend to be formal, referential, commemorative, and backward-looking—vintage before their time, just the sort of poetry that was almost completely obscured by the advent of literary modernism. On the other hand, viewed holistically, there is a compelling sense of quirky humor, passion, historicity, and mystery about Gibson's writing, a body of work peppered with veiled autobiographical fragments that conceal as much as they reveal. Gibson published his books of poetry in tasteful limited editions, individually signed and sold by subscription, a genteel publishing practice with roots in eighteenth-century manuscript circulation and nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century self-publication.<sup>38</sup>

The payoff for reconstituting the Gibson House as a literary museum is that it opens up myriad possibilities for generating historically grounded narratives and interpretations and moves us away from parochialism, anachronism, or the corrosive tendencies of evasion, circumlocution, and concealment—the epistemology of the closet. According to his will and last testament, which included the bylaws for the museum and the Gibson Society, Inc., Gibson intended to preserve his family home and the summer cottage, Forty Steps, Nahant, as "literary and horticultural shrines and complete examples of the period from 1859 to 1900, said premises and their direct contents to be maintained for the Education of the public."<sup>39</sup> Reconceptualizing the Gibson House as a literary museum or literary shrine should not be thought of as historical revisionism; it is, in this case, an act of cultural restoration and historic preservation.

<sup>37</sup> For example, on two occasions in 1931, Gibson read "Ode to a Toad" and "To a Screech Owl," poems from his collection *Laughingtown Tales* on Caroline Cabot's Concert Hour for children.

<sup>38</sup> The first printing of the American classic *The Education of Henry Adams* (Adams [1918] 1999), for example, falls into this category.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Hammond Gibson Jr., personal papers, manuscript collection of the Gibson House Museum, Boston, Massachusetts.

## Conclusion



Figure 5: Charles Hammond Gibson Jr., and John Marquand in the Drawing Room or Library of Gibson's Residence at 137 Beacon Street, Boston, Massachusetts. Photo by Otto Hagel (1909–1998). Originally Published in *Life Magazine*, 1941

Source: With permission from the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona

The March 1941 issue of *Life* magazine contains a photo-essay, "Marquand's Boston: A Trip with American's Foremost Satirist." Among the many novels that John Phillips Marquand published is *The Late George Apley* ([1936] 1937), for which he won the Pulitzer Prize. The essay contains a half-page photo capturing Gibson and Marquand chatting in the library of the Gibson House Museum. The caption under the photo reads,

The black walnut period of Victorian Boston (1859) is perfectly preserved in the home of Charles Hammond Gibson (at desk), 137 Beacon Street. The house, by early Boston standards, would be more elegant if it were on the "water side" of the thoroughfare, backing up against the river. Here is the upstairs drawing room. All the furniture is over 50 years old. Mr. Gibson wants to convert the place into a museum reflecting the era when great prosperity gave Beacon Street homes a massive ugliness then considered good taste. (*Life* 1941, 64)

Marquand noted, with his trademark sarcasm, that Boston has changed over time (particularly with regard to immigration and ethnic diversity), but its essential character, its "vivid strength and a vital sort of continuity," remains. Commenting on his interview with Gibson, Marquand surmises,

I do not know whether the typical Bostonian of the future will come from Puritan or Irish or Italian stock, but I am sure he will absorb personal characteristics from his environment. Only this winter one of the old guard of Beacon Street was speaking sadly of the old days. He ended by remarking regretfully that there were no longer any quaint characters in Boston. It never occurred to him that he was assuming that essential role and that time had marched on until he himself was a character. (Marquand 1941, 70)

It is just such a character that appears so vividly in *The Late George Apley* and, similarly, in George Santayana's *The Last Puritan* (1936), for which Santayana was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. If the Gibson House Museum is a kind of text, it is one that has periodically lost its narrator and central character.

The Gibson House Museum's eccentric origin story and Charles Gibson's socially complex turn-of-the-century literary milieu suggest a broad range of story threads we could profitably explore. We might continue to investigate, for example, how the dominant narratives of families and their museums conceal as much as they reveal, exclude as much as they include, probing their cultural silences and dislocations. Historical work in house museums should, I think, focus on transforming the ephemeral, the everyday artifacts and cultural practices, into an enduring legacy (Gernes 2001). At a practical level, this means close collaboration with scholars and academic institutions in sympathy with the institution's mission; creating permanent budget lines for innovative research and educational programming informed by scholarship; and paying special attention to the creation, management, and curation of institutional and archival records, leveraging digitization, when possible, perhaps through partnerships and collaboration with colleges and universities or state and regional archives. Often, this is more a question of prioritization than massive cash infusion, but fundraising goals, major donor cultivation and acknowledgment, board committee organization, and staffing should reflect and support these priorities. Too often, these things are neglected in the ongoing struggle to keep the lights on and the bill collectors at bay.

One powerful strategy for increasing the narrative complexity and historical dynamism of small museums, as I have argued and hopefully demonstrated in this essay, is to explore their entangled histories, the intersections and convergences that connect, in this case, a house museum with a narrow regional focus to a more diverse history and world.<sup>40</sup> The idea is to reconceptualize small museums as open texts rather than collections of historically frozen tableaux. Exploring these entangled narratives of inclusion and exclusion in a grounded way, I would argue, can open up new horizons, unlock a rich diversity of micro-histories, and engage viewers, expanding audiences and stakeholders and revitalizing the stories that small museums tell about themselves, about their worlds, and, ultimately, about history.

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<sup>40</sup> For an example of historical entanglement as a methodological and interpretive strategy, see Todd S. Gernes (2023), "Engaging Presentism in World History as Concept and in the Classroom." A similar term and approach have been used productively by scholars of world history: "connected history" (Subrahmanyam 2022; Berberian 2019).



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The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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## Appendix A

Archival Document: Letter from Charles Hammond Gibson, Jr, to Edith Russell Playfair, November 24, 1919. Charles Gibson, then twenty-six years old, writes in a beseeching tone to his cousin, Edith:

*Dear Cousin Edith,*

*I forgot to ask you in my letters to you in regard to the “affair Versailles,” to particularly not to mention it in any letters home.*

*It is always, I think, much better to keep such matters as private as possible and to hush up if possible anything that was said from outside of our relation.*

*Feeling that I could not remain any longer I thought I would write, in case you should have heard anything upsetting from another direction.*

*As having done what was lust, I do not want my relations Etc in any way discussed or criticized by those who do not know about the matter [.] You will understand, I am sure, how much better it is not to say anything in regard to me.*

*I am staying on in Paris, here, until after Xmas, I think; and may remain over the winter; it is so interesting. A great many friends and things going on. I saw Mr. Coolidge yesterday who is at the Bristol with Miss Hetty Sargent [?].*

*Today Kruger makes his entry into Paris—I wonder what the end of it all will be? With remembrances to you all*

*Yours all*

*I am*

*Charlie*

Charles Hammond Gibson, Jr., personal papers, in the manuscript collection of the Gibson House Museum, Boston, Massachusetts. This timeframe, 1898–1910, corresponds closely with a significant homosexual scandal in Europe involving Maurice Mauny-Talvande (Gibson’s dear friend, “The Count de Mauny”), and other affluent British men.

## Appendix B

Archival Document: Manuscript poem, “The Hermit Crabs” (1945):

### I

*We are the hermits; the celibates we,  
Without wives, without servants that serve,  
(And that only un-nerve),  
Without help that helps not,  
And is only a blot,  
When it's tied to the family tree.*

### II

*We are the crabs that crawl into our holes,  
In the crannies and cupboards of home,  
For there we can roam,  
Without any gainsay,  
Heaven's freedom by day,  
And at night we may burrow like moles.*

### III

*O, the joys of the hermit, who lives all alone!  
The peace and the freedom from care!  
And the pure, pallid air.  
The tempo is slower,  
(But the bills are much lower,)  
We enjoy what our brothers bemoan.*

Charles Hammond Gibson Jr., personal papers, manuscript collection of the Gibson House Museum, Boston, Massachusetts.

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