



“Oops!”

The American Pin-Up: An Ignored Art Form

Janey Ellis
ARH 358
Simmons

I believe that the great “illustrators” of the twentieth century – and particularly the masters of the American pin-up – deserve, as much as any other artists of quality, to have their works appear in galleries, museums, and history books. The best of the pin-up artists were, in fact, innovative; their experiments centered around finding new and interesting variations on how to present the human figure in two dimensions. Elvgren, in particular, was renowned for his daring, tongue-in-cheek situation images, in which an accidentally sexy event happened to an absolutely innocent all-American girl.

—Louis K. Meisel, “The ‘Fine’ Art of Illustration”
The Great American Pin-Up

Throughout art history certain aspects of art have been bypassed and even ignored. Most ignored is twentieth century commercial art, specifically illustrators, and more specifically pin-up artists. These artists created one of the most iconic images of the twentieth century: the American pin-up girl. A clear definition of what the “pin-up” is needs to be made first. The pin-up, in this examination, is a drawn or painted image of a female, from the mid-twentieth century, who is either clothed or partially clothed, may be wearing lingerie, swim attire, or an entire outfit. Often, a situation has occurred to the woman in question that has caused more (i.e. stocking tops) to be revealed. The pin-up may also be nude, but this is more the minority than the majority. Above all, the pin-up is never shown engaging in sexual activity of any sort. Her facial expression is, more often than not, that of a wide smile, surprised, or pert look. Many of the pin-up artists studied traditionally at universities and academies, some even studying in Paris. However, their work has been often tossed to the wayside in the art history books, and usually classified as images used to only supplement packaging and advertisements, but never as actual art. Another possible explanation for the lack of attention may be due to the somewhat sexual nature of the pin-up herself has led to the images having a sleazy reputation, when in fact these artists sought to capture the all-American girl in all of her beauty and all that she was capable of while looking stunning. The use of the pin-up girl has had many incarnations and uses by a wide

variety of artists. In this essay, I intend to examine the history of the pin-up, the aspects in which the pin-up was used, as well as the artists that created them.

Portrayed in a variation of images and situations, the pin-up girl has her roots in the art of Charles Dana Gibson and his infamous “Gibson Girl”, which is wife posed for. In the 1880s and through the 1910s, the Gibson Girl appeared in magazines such as *Collier’s*, *Harper’s Weekly*, and *Life*, which Gibson would eventually own as well as be the editor of. The Gibson Girl became the first ideal female figure and simultaneously, the first pin-up. Her sensual curves and independent spirit made her the “Sweetheart of America” by the fact that she was a blend of “the girl-next-door with the girl-of-your-dreams”.¹ The notion of the centerfold was also created with the Gibson Girl, when *Life* chose to place a two page spread of her in the center of the magazine where the staples came through, allowing for easy removal. The popularity of the Gibson Girl rose quickly, and “[h]er likeness appeared on all sorts of everyday objects: postcards, porcelain plates, candy boxes, souvenir spoons, fans, handkerchiefs”² in addition to magazine covers and prints. Her legacy has lived on as well. Along Disneyland’s Main Street, in both California and Disneyland Paris, there is the Gibson Girl Ice Cream Parlor. In 1963, Farrell’s Ice Cream Parlor opened in Portland, Oregon, and created subsequent chains, using Gibson Girl images in their marketing, including glassware and matchbooks and decor. In 1993, Mattel created a collectable Barbie version of the Gibson Girl and in 1998, the United States Postal Service honored the Gibson Girl with her own stamp, seen in Figure 1.



Fig. 1

¹ p. 14, Louis K. Meisel, “The Art and Life of Gil Elvgren”, [Gil Elvgren: All his glamorous American pin-ups](#)

² p. 25, Charles G. Martignette, “The Great American Pin-Up”, [The Great American Pin-Up](#)



Fig. 2

Following Gibson was Chandler Christy with his Christy Girl during the decade of the 1920s, and later German born J.C. Leyendecker would become a significant commercial artist with the likes of Norman Rockwell. Each of these men focused much of their attention at supplementing magazine articles and advertisements due to money. The classic pin-up of the 1950s got her real start in the 1930s. This early pin-up artwork provided illustrations to pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales*, as well as humor magazines such as *Film Fun*, seen in Figure 2, and *Gay Book*. These magazines would have a later incarnation, fueled by a demand for pin-ups during the Second World War by soldiers overseas. Choosing to capitalize on the pin-up craze was Robert Harrison and his array of “girlie” magazines. In 1941, Harrison gave the public *Beauty Parade*, which was followed by *Eyeful*, *Titter*, *Wink*, *Whisper*, and *Flirt*. The majority of these magazines had an illustrated pin-up cover done by, more often than not, one of three of Harrison’s favorite artists and friends: Peter Driben, Earl Moran, or Billy De Vorss. Driben did



Fig. 3

the cover seen in Figure 3. The inner pages of these magazines, however, proved to be less artistic. The images and “articles” or “photostories”, as they were sometimes called, usually involved “scantily clad girls capering through comic slapstick situations”. These images and situations had their roots in the Americanized version of burlesque, “the poorer disreputable relation...of vaudeville theatre”. Yet, in these magazines, women would appear scantily clad in

“underwear, bikinis or saucy stage costumes” but never naked, “that was better left to the nudist magazines or ‘art’ books”³. There were a few other magazines that were more focused on other topics that also incorporated pin-ups into their issues. One such example is *Esquire*. Starting in 1940, *Esquire* hired Alberto Vargas, a Peruvian immigrant who had grown up helping his photographer father, Max Vargas, and enjoyed sensuous issues from magazines on his travels with his father to Paris. He studied in Zurich and Geneva before leaving Europe due to World War I, arriving in the United States in 1916. In New York he became enthralled by the American woman and decided to put his artistic skills to work. After performing work at Adelson Hat Company and creating images for Ziegfeld Follies, a series of theatrical productions in New York City that ran during the 1900s through the 1930s, *Esquire* hired him and eventually Vargas Girl centerfolds were a commonality, and the magazine also published full 12 page calendars of his work. The backing of such a popular magazine helped Vargas become one of the most respected names in pin-up art. Once leaving *Esquire* in 1947, he put his pin-up talents into film posters, and eventually ended up at the recently developed *Playboy*. These later, 1960s pin-ups were far less innocent and often included more nudity than previously seen. After the death of his wife in 1974, Vargas lost much of his interest in art, and only did three other requested images, all of which were album covers, furthering the elasticity of the pin-up image.

Pin-up artists could put their skill of scantily clad women to work not only for pure viewing pleasure, but for advertising and package design as well. Since pin-ups were of women, their images could easily be applied toward advertisements targeted at women.



Fig. 4

³ Harald Hellmann, “Girls, Gags & Giggles: The world as madhouse”, [1000 Pin-Up Girls](#)

George Petty, who also had done pin-ups for *Esquire*, as well as found work with Ziegfeld Follies, put his talent to work for Jantzen swimwear, as see in the 1937 ad in Figure 4 on the previous page.

Stockings, especially seamed stockings, became a trademark of the classic pin-up. This resulted in pin-up artists using their skills in advertisements and packaging for stockings, as well as kits to help fix hosiery, such as Press-On Hosiery Mender, as seen in Figure 5. Press-On Hosiery Mender was an iron-on kit that provided a small panel of nylon to fix holes in stockings. This 1944 packaging is illustrated with a lovely pin-up exemplifying the joy she has received by the Press-On kit mending her stocking.



Fig. 5

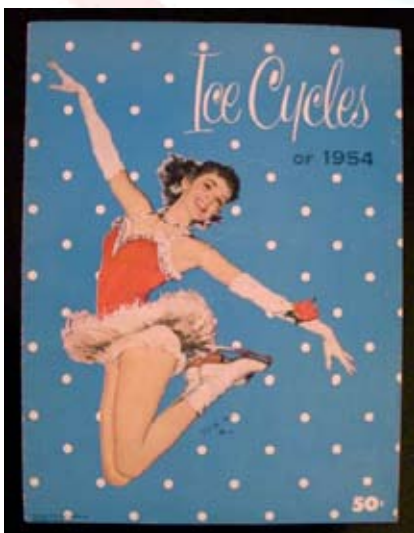


Fig. 6

Pin-up artists were also sought after in other realms. Joe De Mers was asked multiple years to illustrate the covers of the Ice Capades programs beginning in 1953. The traveling ice skating show prided itself on being a “the Show for the Whole Family”⁴, and performed ice renditions of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Cinderella*, which makes the choice for a pin-up artist interesting, as well as compelling to prove the variety of these commercial illustrators. De Mers also taught art at the Parsons School of Design in New York City during the 1950s. Additionally, his “fine-art” paintings have been exhibited in both New York’s Museum of Modern Art, as well as the Los Angeles County Museum.

⁴ “Ice Cycles of 1953”, Ice Capades event program

The pin-up genre was not limited to male artists. There were several prolific female artists as well. Zoe Mozert is in all likelihood the most successful of the female artists. She had an exclusive contract with the company Brown & Bigelow, and did illustrations for the film industry, most notably, the poster for Howard Hughes' 1943 film *The Outlaw*. While most pin-up artists worked from live models, Mozert used herself as her own model by photographing herself and using the photos as reference images. Another renowned female artist of the time was Joyce Ballantyne. She too worked at Brown & Bigelow, after being recommended by a fellow pin-up artist, as well as posed for her own work. But perhaps Ballantyne is best known for her "junior pin-up girl", the Coppertone girl, who was modeled after her own daughter. The image of the small girl with the bottoms of her swimsuit tugged by a dog has become an icon of summertime and has been parodied several times in American culture.

Like Ballantyne, commercial artist Haddon Sundblom has often had his pin-up artwork overlooked due to his popular rendition of Santa Claus that he created for the Coca-Cola Company in 1931, as well as the Sprite Boy in 1942. Sundblom also created the classic image of Aunt Jemima for Aunt Jemima pancake mix and the Quaker Oats man in 1957. His best-known pin-up, was also his last. Done in 1972, four years before his death, Sundblom combined his Santa and pin-ups for the cover of the December issue of *Playboy*, seen in Figure 7. Though his pin-up art never had as prolific impact as other artists, he was a friend and connection to others.



Fig. 7

But perhaps the most iconic and successful pin-up artist was Gil Elvgren, becoming the most recognized, sought after, and researched. His humorous situational pin-ups graced calendar after calendar, as well as other forms of advertisements. Born in 1914, Elvgren studied architecture and design at the University of Minnesota, he also took art classes at the Minneapolis Art Institute. He eventually moved to Chicago and enrolled in the American Academy of Art, graduating in two years, and his art was used to illustrate the academy's catalogues and brochures. Moving to St. Paul in 1936, his big break came only a year later in 1937, when the "largest, most important, and most successful calendar – publishing company in the world"⁵, Brown & Bigelow asked Elvgren to paint two portraits of the famous Dionne Quintuplets to use as calendars. Brown & Bigelow did not hire Elvgren immediately afterwards, but their competitor, Louis F. Dow Calendar Company did, and they asked him to do a series of pin-ups for them. It was at Dow where Elvgren's pin-ups hit calendars, notepads, ink blotters, matchbook covers, and mutoscope cards. Most of these incarnations served a dual purpose; they were advertisements as well.



Matchbooks were the cheapest form of advertising and often used by smaller, independent businesses across the country. The image in Figure 8 is one such example. With Elvgren's 1939 "Figures Don't Lie" image on one side, and the information for Miami Cigar Store on the other side, matchbooks proved to be a way for patrons to keep a business in mind by keeping it in their pocket, along with a pretty girl.

In 1944, Elvgren left Dow when he was asked to become a staff artist at

Fig. 8 Brown & Bigelow, continuing similar work that he had performed at Dow. In addition to working at Dow and Brown & Bigelow, Elvgren worked side-by-side with Sundblom

⁵ p. 24, Charles G. Martignette, "The Great American Pin-Up", [The Great American Pin-Up](#)

at Coca-Cola for 25 years, painting classic all-American images, often females in the pin-up style, to sell the all-American product.



Fig. 9

But by far the most common method of combining pin-ups and advertisements was through calendars. These calendars had a very simple pattern design to them that allowed for different images and companies to be swapped out. Most of these followed the one image and tear-away month pattern, as seen in Figure 9. Here, the printing company provided a base, and then a pin-up was chosen to be glued or stapled into the area above. The space between the image and the calendar itself was used for the advertisement portion, as noted in

Figure 9, and the small-stapled calendar could be attached below that. These types of calendars were often used for businesses usually targeted toward men; auto part shops, barbershops, and gas stations. Another popular form of the pin-up calendar was the single image – single year version. This version had a pin-up printed on the same paper as a full year calendar and left room for the business information to be printed later. Some of these, such as the calendar in Figure 10, had the pin-up advertising a certain company that a business used. Here, we see that Aeroquip, has their pin-up with the catalogue for



Fig. 10

Aeroquip, The Flying A, and the calendar was then subsequently use by Myrmo & Sons, who used Aeroquip materials, with their location information printed below the image.

As the years went on, the demand for scantily clad women moved toward more perverse realms to the tune of *Hustler* and the like. The days of the innocent girl-next-door image met an end with the coming of the Vietnam War and other dramatic changes in American history. But, thankfully, recent collectors of mid-twentieth century commercial art have begun to make an effort to preserve the pin-up and to give her her rightful place in art history. Louis K. Meisel has offered up a specialty area, titled “The Great American Pin-Up”, in his gallery in New York City dedicated to the pin-up with original paintings. Additionally, Elvgren’s success has continued to grow. Avalanche Publishing has in recent years developed a pin-up calendar, to the tune of the average everyday calendar of today, in both large, small, day-by-day, and planner formats of Elvgren’s work. Hopefully, this continuing interest in preserving an icon of the twentieth century will persuade scholars and the like to give the pin-up the recognition she deserves.

FIGURES

Cover: “Class Dismissed”. Date: 1970. Artist: Gil Elvgren. Source: Scan from [Gil Elvgren: All his glamorous American pin-ups](#)

Figure 1: United States Postal Service “Gibson Girl” stamp. Date: 1993. Artist: Charles Dana Gibson. Source: The Personal Collection of Janey Ellis

Figure 2: *Film Fun* magazine. Date: Unknown. Artist: Enoch Bolles. Source: <http://www.thepinupfiles.com/images/KBS-bolles-015-LG.jpg>

Figure 3: *Beauty Parade* magazine. Date: December 1955. Artist: Peter Driben. Source: The Personal Collection of Janey Ellis

Figure 4: Jantzen swimwear ad. Date: 1937. Artist: George Petty. Source: The Personal Collection of Janey Ellis

Figure 5: Press-On Hosiery Mender. Date: 1944. Artist: Unknown. Source: The Personal Collection of Janey Ellis

Figure 6: Ice Cycles program. Date: 1954. Artist: Joe De Mers. Source: The Personal Collection of Janey Ellis

Figures 7: *Playboy* magazine. Date: December 1972. Artist: Haddan Sundblom. Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Playboy_magazine_december_1972_cover.jpg

Figure 8: Miami Cigar Store matchbook using the image, “Figures Don’t Lie”. Date 1939. Artist: Gil Elvgren. Source: The Personal Collection of Janey Ellis

Figure 9: Sales pitch calendar. Date: 1939. Artist: Earl Moran. Source: The Personal Collection of Joe Klem

Figure 10: Myrmo & Sons/Aeroquip calendar. Date: 1978. Artist Bill Randall. Source: The Personal Collection of Janey Ellis