

MÜNCHNER STUDIEN zur neueren und neuesten Geschichte

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American Women in Cartoons 1890-1920

Female Representation and the Changing Concepts of Femininity
during the American Woman Suffrage Movement



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Introduction

Several years ago an international skin-lotion producer launched a commercial campaign that stressed an average female figure over the widely promoted contemporary beauty idol of thin young women. The uncommon realistically presented women drew a lot of attention and resulted in a very positive response among female consumers.¹ The effect of this advertisement reveals the discontent of a substantial portion of women towards beauty idols that are presented by everyday media. Simultaneously, it shows the strong impact that graphic media has on female identity. Beauty and role models are cultural codes transported by media that have an important effect on gender identity. On the one hand this tool of graphic media had long been used to restrict women and limit them to traditional feminine roles in society. On the other hand the unconventional usage of the skin-lotion advertisement demonstrates the potential power of figurative media to also create and promote an emancipated, self-confident female identity.

This thesis analyzes one of the earliest examples of a group that used modern graphic media to forge a new ideal of womanhood, the American woman suffrage movement. Oriented on the historical division of the suffrage movement into three phases that represent different stages in organization and strategy,² this thesis concentrates on the third phase from 1890 to 1920, in which women finally achieved the right to vote. In this time period a truly revolutionary redefinition of the concept of femininity took place. The woman suffrage movement however fought for the economic and political emancipation of women since the 1850s. Tracing the path of mass media and female emancipation back in time it is striking that the woman's movement, after a seventy-year long struggle for suffrage, finally gained the right to vote only after using cartoons and other images to present a new concept of femininity, the emancipated notion of the so called New Woman. The reasons for the suffrage movement's final success were undoubtedly due to various components: progressivism or the occupational necessities of World War I for instance were important aspects that advanced emancipation. The representation of these new notions of femininity

¹ The skin-lotion producer doubled its sales within less than a year. Jörn Sucher, "Schönheitswahn ade: Werben mit Bauch, Beinen und Po," in *Spiegel Online*, September 1 2005. <http://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/schönheitswahn-ade-werben-mit-bauch-beine-po-a-372097> (02/15/20012).

² The periodization of the American suffrage movement is: 1848 – 1869 for first organizational foundations, 1879-1890 in which two competing organizations launched a suffrage press and 1890 -1920, in which the movement was reunited and gained increasing support of the general public. Steven Buechler, *Women's Movements in the United States: Woman Suffrage, Equal Rights and Beyond* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 45.

in the general public, regardless of whether they were derived from egalitarian principles or from the consequences of contemporary history, played a crucial role in influencing public opinion, which was necessary for the final realization of women's political emancipation. In this context the correlation between the success of the suffrage movement and its first serious use of graphic media roughly a decade earlier is remarkable.

a) Hypotheses, methodology and sources

This thesis examines two major hypotheses. Firstly, that the figurative medium cartoon considerably contributed to the formation of a new concept of femininity in the USA from 1890 to 1920 and secondly that cartoons communicated the new ideals on a non-verbal, but influential level that textual representation could not provide. Entailing these hypothesizes other questions about the position of cartoons in the process of changing feminine ideal come to mind. In which fields, for example, did the women's cartoons support the demands of the woman's movement? What definition of womanhood did they communicate? What role did cartoons play within the public discourse about the position of women in society? And finally, what significance can be assigned to cartoons in the aim of creating a new concept of femininity?

In order to answer these questions this thesis follows a structural line of argumentation. An inevitable interdisciplinary approach demands substantial background knowledge before the actual analysis of the cartoons can begin. Chapter one will lay a theoretical foundation in understanding the social structure of emancipation movements applied specifically to the woman suffrage movement based on Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault and their reception in feminist theory. It is followed by an introduction to the basic history of the American woman suffrage movement, which however will be concentrated on the movement's progressing strategies to persuade the public of an emancipated notion of womanhood up until the point in time when it started to employ cartoons. Chapter two provides an overview of the remarkable role cartoons had played in American History. An introduction about techniques that cartoons can employ to convey their messages, also provides the basics of semiotics applied to visual media, which later serve as structural guidelines for the analysis of the cartoons. The subsequent section provides sociological insights into the significance of figurative media in the process of gender identity formation including the different functions visual media can fulfill in processes of social change. Based on this background knowledge, chapter three, four and five analyze representations of women in cartoons. The predominant concepts of femininity in the middle of the nineteenth century and their manifestations in figurative media constitute the status quo of women's public image in the USA. Occurrences of

gradually liberating role models around the turn of the century indicate the beginning of a change in the public conception of women. Unlike the cartoons ridiculing suffragists that circulated since the beginning of the suffrage movement, suffrage journals finally started to offer counter-images of emancipated women in 1910.

Oriented on Achim Landwehr's elaborations on historical discourse analysis and with the intent to provide the most possible objectivity in analysis and selection of the sources,³ three of the most important suffrage publications between 1908 and 1920 were chosen as the empirical basis for the analysis of the woman suffrage press' cartoons in chapter four. *The Woman's Journal* as the official organ of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) represents the moderate wing of the woman suffrage movement. *The Suffragist* on the other side of the spectrum was the organ of the more radical Congressional Union that later formed the Woman's Party. They both were weekly journals of national circulation. *The Woman Voter* finally was chosen because of its regional emphasis in New York City. The American east coast was a special area of concentration in the fight for woman suffrage in the 1910s. The two former journals were selected according to a systematic method regarding the two election months October and November of each year. In order to counteract possible concentrations on comments about parties the alternate non-election years were also included in the selection. *The Woman Voter* as a monthly publication was viewed entirely in order to provide greater representativeness. The analytical contemplation of all cartoons selected in this systematic manner resulted in four superordinate categories of argumentation which will be analyzed in detail in chapter four.⁴

For the reactions of the general interest journals in chapter five, the publications *Life* and *Harper's Weekly* were chosen because of their format, which was renowned for their extensive usage of cartoons. *Life* represents the more humorous approach while *Harper's Weekly* and its successor journal *The Independent* cover the general news genre. They were both selected with the method of cluster sampling, oriented on twelve eminent events in the economic, social and political progress of women's position from 1909 to 1920 as well as important events in general American history.⁵ In order to include a continuous ele-

³ Landwehr provides a guideline for empirical studies in historical discourse analysis. He notes that the subjectivity of the author in selection and analysis can never be entirely eliminated. Achim Landwehr, *Geschichte des Sagbaren. Einführung in die Historische Diskursanalyse*, 2nd ed., (Berlin: edition discord, 2004), 104, 107. Subjectivity can however be minimized through considerate selection and transparency of the research design.

⁴ For a more detailed explanation of the research design of the woman's press sample see chapter 4.

⁵ For a list of the selected events see image, no. 47.

ment in the sample the journal *The Literary Digest*, which compiled articles and cartoons from the most influential publications throughout the U.S., was viewed in its entirety for the eleven years in question.⁶ The cartoon samples of these journals build the foundation for the evaluation of the general press' reaction on the cartoons depicting positive emancipated women, which will firstly analyze major arguments of anti-suffrage cartoons and secondly demonstrate the diffusion of an emancipated image of women in the general press. A systematic research of textual sources concerning the discourse about women's position in society will provide the basis for a comparison with the visual cartoon sources. Four major databases of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the USA, the *19th Century Masterfile*, *The Reader's Guide Retrospective*, *American Periodical Series* and *The Gerritsen Collection* were searched for specific key terms associated with the change of the concept of womanhood.⁷

The critical contemplation of the effect of cartoons in the following will provide indications for an assessment of the cartoons' impact on contemporaries. In a conclusion finally the hypotheses will be reviewed and the single parts of this thesis will be recapitulated in order to provide a best possible evaluation of the significance of cartoons in transporting a new concept of femininity.

b) Scientific contextualization, state of research and literature

This thesis is situated in an interdisciplinary field between media and gender history. Visual media as historical sources have been long neglected in academic history. If they found attention, they mostly served as illustration of the historical "hard facts": the textual sources. However, a growing acknowledgment of visual media as serious and significant historical sources since the 1980s has recently generated several works in this field. A collection of essays by

⁶ For a more detailed explanation of the systematic cartoon selection of the general journals see chapter 5.

⁷ *19th Century Masterfile* is a bibliographical database compiling the most important periodical indices of the time. *American Periodical Series*, provides full text online versions of over 1100 American periodicals that first began publishing between 1740 and 1900 and hold issues until the late 1930s. *The Reader's Guide Retrospective* enabled a completion of the periodical press sample with its bibliographical index of the most popular general-interest periodicals in the U.S. from 1890 to 1982. *The Gerritsen Collection* finally compiles pamphlets and periodicals reflecting the evolution of the movement for woman's rights. All these databases were systematically searched with key terms such as "New Woman," "Femininity," "Identity," "Suffrage," "Vote," "Cartoon," "Depiction" and so forth in order to provide a best possible representative sample for a comparison of textual sources with the visual cartoon sources within the great discourse about women's gender identity.

Gerhard Paul published in 2006 characterizes their approach as a successful eclectic mix of methods, most drawing on iconology and semiotics.⁸ The contemplations about the medium cartoon and the concrete analysis of the visual sources in this thesis are oriented on these scientific traditions.

The history of cartoons in the U.S. together with the background about the American woman suffrage movement build the contextual framework, in which the actual analysis of the cartoons must be situated, in order to understand how they operated and to attempt an evaluation of their effect. The emphasis on popular culture in American academia already produced research on cartooning history in the 1930s and 1940s,⁹ which was revived in the scientific examination of iconography and cartoons since the 1980s.¹⁰

Woman's and gender history as well has a comparatively long tradition in the U.S. and has established itself as an independent subject in most American universities. Accordingly it has generated a thorough core of scientific researches, which, after the general processes in women's history had been explored in the 1960s and 1970s, has created a canon of feminist theory in the 1980s and 1990s and now produces detailed works that follow a more regional or structural analytical approach. This thesis situates itself in this tradition of gender history and builds upon the knowledge provided by former studies on cartoon as well as gender research.

The interdisciplinary approach of this thesis also fragments the overview of the eminent literature. For the theoretical background the feminist reception of Jürgen Habermas' *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, which was translated as late as 1989, is crucial. Most central is Nancy Fraser's essay "Rethinking the Public Sphere" and the collection of essays *Feminists Read Habermas* by Johanna Meehan.¹¹ In combination with the feminist enhancements of Foucault and the reciprocal relation of power, discourses and identity, for which Regina Becker-Schmidt's essay on feminist debates about subject-construction was es-

⁸ Gerhard Paul, "Von der historischen Bildkunde zur Visual History" in Gerhard Paul, ed., *Visual History. Ein Studienbuch* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 8; 24.

⁹ The tradition in cartooning history in the U.S. goes back to William Murrell, *A History of American Graphic Humor* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1933-1935) and Frank Weitenkampf and Nevis Allan, *A Century of Political Cartoons* (New York: C. Scribner's sons, 1944).

¹⁰ Larry J. Reynolds, "American Cultural Iconography," introduction to Reynolds, Larry J. and Gordon Hutner, eds., *National Imaginaries, American Identities: the Cultural Work of American Iconography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 3.

¹¹ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy" in *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (Raleigh, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 56-80; Johanna Meehan, ed., *Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

sential,¹² they provide important theoretical insights. This theoretical background not only facilitates understanding the structural development of the woman suffrage movement but also situates the diffusion of emancipated depictions of women in the larger process of emancipation through democratic discourses in the public sphere.

Literature about the American woman suffrage movement is plentiful. Standard works that were indispensable throughout this thesis are Sarah Evan's *Born for Liberty*, Nancy Cott's *No Small Courage* or Eleanor Flexner's *Century of Struggle*. Instrumental for the arguments of the suffrage movement over time is the 1965 published but still best elaborated *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement 1890 – 1920* by Aileen Kraditor.¹³ Particularly helpful for outlining the woman suffrage movement's progressing means of persuasion were Marta Solomon's collection of essays about the woman suffrage press, Kathleen Endres' and Therese Lueck's *Women's Periodicals in the United States* and *Selling Suffrage* from Margaret Finnegan, the latter providing useful information about the commercialized but also innovative new methods of persuasion of the new suffragists in the 1910s.¹⁴

Concerning the historical significance of editorial cartoons in the U.S. *Them Damned Pictures* by Roger Fischer constitutes the most contemporary scientific work and for a more chronological approach Stephen Hess's *Drawn and Quartered* also provides a useful overview.¹⁵ For an introduction to cartooning techniques the works of Steve Whitaker and Scott McCloud represent eminent manuals, which provide not only guidelines of cartooning techniques but also

¹² Regina Becker-Schmidt, „Feministische Debatten zur Subjektkonstitution,“ in Regina Becker-Schmidt and Gudrun-Axeli Knapp, *Feministische Theorien. Zur Einführung*, 3rd ed. (Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 2003).

¹³ Sara M Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York, The Free Press, 1989); Nancy F. Cott, *No Small Courage: A History of Women in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Aileen, S. Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890 – 1920* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965).

¹⁴ Marta Solomon, *A Voice of her Own: The Woman Suffrage Press, 1840 – 1910* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991); Kathleen L. Endres and Therese L. Lueck, eds., *Women's Periodicals in the United States. Social and Political Issues* (Westport, Connecticut.: Greenwood Press, 1996); Margaret Finnegan, *Selling Suffrage: Consumer Culture and Votes for Women* (New York: Columbia University Press New York, 1999).

¹⁵ Roger A. Fischer, *Them Damned Pictures: Explorations in American Political Cartoon Art* (North Haven, Connecticut: Archon Book, 1996); Stephen Hess and Sandy Northrop, *Drawn & Quartered: the History of American Political Cartoons* (Montgomery, Alabama.: Elliott & Clark Publishing, 1996).

indicate means of pictorial manipulation.¹⁶ The literature about effects of figurative media on identity formation combines insights of scholars of psychology, sociology and gender studies. Most essential is Erik Erikson's psychological elaboration about the constitution of identity.¹⁷ Building upon him David Gauntlett's *Media, Gender and Identity* as well as Renate Luca's collection of essays on media and gender socialization reveal the coherence between gender, identity and media.¹⁸ The particular potential of figurative media, finally, to mirror and influence identity and social change was noted by Thomas Kemnitz in his essay about the cartoon as a historical source and was also stated by empirical studies such as Robyn Goodman's essay on suffrage cartoons.¹⁹

Concerning the specific topic of visual representation and impact of visual media on female identity the literature becomes thinner. Only Martha Banta provides an analysis of the visual representation of the concept of femininity in the middle of the nineteenth century with her monumental work *Imagining American Women*.²⁰ The ambiguous character of the Gibson Girl as the first liberating role model is excellently analyzed by Angelika Köhler.²¹ Aspects about visual representations of early suffragists can be found in Hoffert's *When Hens Crow*.²² The most central secondary literature for cartoon representation of women in the 1910s is doubtlessly Alice Sheppard's *Cartooning for Suffrage* as well as three essays by her on suffrage cartoons in the early twentieth century.²³

¹⁶ Steve Whitaker, *The Encyclopedia of Cartooning Techniques* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 1994); Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. 1st ed., (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994).

¹⁷ Erik Erikson, *Identität und Lebenszyklus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966).

¹⁸ David Gauntlett, *Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002); Renate Luca, ed., *Medien Sozialisation Geschlecht* (München: kopaed, 2003).

¹⁹ Thomas Milton Kemnitz, "The Cartoon as a Historical Source," in *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 4, no. 1, The Historian and the Arts, Summer 1973. J. Robyn Goodman, "The Woman's Suffragist Movement Through the Eyes of *Life* Magazine Cartoons," in Matthew P. McAllister, Edward H. Sewell and Ian Gordon, eds., *Comics and Ideology: Popular Culture & Everyday Life* (New York: P. Lang, 2001).

²⁰ Martha Banta, *Imagining American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

²¹ Angelika Köhler, "Charged with ambiguity: The image of the New Woman in American cartoons," in Ann Heilmann and Margaret Beetham, eds., *New Woman Hybridities. Femininity, Feminism and International Consumer Culture, 1880 – 1930* (London: Routledge, 2004).

²² Sylvia Hoffert, *When Hens Crow: The Woman's Rights Movement in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

²³ Alice Sheppard, *Cartooning for Suffrage* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994); Alice Sheppard, "There were Ladies Present: American Women Cartoonists and Comic Artists in the Early Twentieth Century," in *Journal of American Culture* 7, no. 3, Fall 1984; Alice Sheppard, "Political and Social Consciousness in the Woman Suffrage Cartoons of Lou Rogers and Nina Allender," in *Studies in American Humor* 4, no. 1 & 2 (Spring /Summer 1985); Alice Sheppard, "Social Cognition, Gender Roles,

This thesis however reaches beyond Sheppard's work, which provides a valuable insight into pro-suffrage cartoons but considers eclectically chosen cartoons, excludes cartoons from the suffrage opposition and doesn't attempt an assessment about the effect of the cartoons. It hence constituted an eminent orientation work for this thesis, but most information for the analysis of the cartoons had to be elaborated from the historical context, the comparison with the textual discourse and the cartoons themselves.

For the reactions of the general press an unpublished study by William Frauenglass about attitudes toward woman suffrage in humor magazines and an essay by Robyn Goodman about suffrage cartoons in *Life* from 1914 to 1919 provided previous insights,²⁴ but as in the case of the pro-suffrage cartoons the different approaches of these works do not provide sufficient answers to the questions posed in this thesis. The study of Katherine Adams, Michael Keene and Melanie McKay about representations of women in the *New York Tribune* and its successor the *New York Herald Tribune* from 1900 to 1950 also provided interesting results²⁵. Analyzing predominantly textual sources from this conservative newspaper, their finding, that representations of women between 1900 and 1920 adhered to the cult of true womanhood and that positive depictions of politically active women only appeared from 1917 on, when they complied with that code but exploited it for the woman's cause, differs from the results of the analysis of visual sources in the general press sample of this thesis. The cartoons published in *Life*, *Harper's Weekly* and *The Literary Digest* included single positive depictions of modern women since 1912 without adhering to the traditional cultural code of true womanhood²⁶.

Finally, concerning the effect of cartoons primary sources had to be consulted in order to provide indications that assessed the impact of cartoons in general and concerning the changed concept of femininity in particular. Central in this regard was the governmental *Bulletin for Cartoonists* during World War I and contemporary letters to the editors of pro- and anti-suffrage publications. Literature that contemplates pro-suffrage as well as anti-suffrage cartoons and that attempts an evaluation of the cartoons' effect within the greater discourse about the negotiated new notion of womanhood does not exist. This thesis, con-

and Women's Humor," in June Sochen, ed., *Women's Comic Visions* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991).

²⁴ William Frauenglass, *A Study of Attitudes Toward Woman Suffrage Found in Popular Humor Magazines, 1911 – 1920* (Dissertation - New York University, 1967); J. Robyn Goodman, "The Woman's Suffragist Movement Through the Eyes of Life Magazine Cartoons," in McAllister, *Comics and Ideology*.

²⁵ Katherine Adams, Michael Keene and Melanie McKay, *Controlling Representations. Depictions of Women in a Mainstream Newspaper, 1900-1950* (Cresshill: Hampton Press, 2009).

²⁶ For a detailed analysis of these positive depictions see chapter 5.3 and 5.4.