

Preserving Heirs and Airs

Boston's history glimpsed through one eccentric's home • by Nell Porter Brown



Clockwise, from top left: The Gibson House Museum's lavish entrance hall illustrates how an upper-class family lived in the early days of the Back Bay's development; the home's relatively simple façade; Rosamond Warren Gibson with her three children (Charles Jr. is in front)

THE STONE and brick townhouse at 137 Beacon Street, a block from the Public Garden, was one of the first grand manses that helped transform the polluted marshlands and mudflats of the Back Bay into Boston's most urbane, affluent neighborhood of the latter nineteenth century. Three generations of the prominent Gibson family lived there, the last of whom was Charles Hammond Gibson Jr. A patrician bon vivant, he ensured the house would be preserved "as is," in all its Victorian opulence, and become the Gibson House Museum after his death. The property opened to the public three years later, in 1957, and was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2001.

"It is the only residence in the Back Bay that retains its original architectural elements," says museum curator Wendy Swanton, noting to the three-story glass-windowed ventilation system, and ice and coal sheds in the rear courtyard. "It's the only



place to see what these homes were like during that important time in Boston's history."

Yet the deeper story reveals one man's response to changing times and his own quest for importance, if not immortality.

An Anglo- and Francophile, Gibson wrote Petrarchan sonnets and droll travelogues. (The Woodberry Poetry Room at Harvard's Lamont Library holds recordings of an 80-year-old Gibson reading some of his poems in 1953; these could soon be available online.) Gibson was also known for his rose gardens, which drew hundreds of admirers to the family's summer home in Nahant, where the butler called him "sire," according to a 1950 *Boston Sunday Herald* article. It goes on to call him "a Proper Bostonian whose Victorian elegance puts modern manners to shame," and "a small man...with a nimble, if sometimes cantankerous physique... He strolls around with a sort of swagger stick with a silver tip out of deference to



From left: Charles Gibson Jr.'s study exhibits his own books and social standing; portraits of Charles Gibson Sr. and Catherine Hammond Gibson who, as a widow, bought the land and had the grand townhouse built in 1859-60

the fact that gold would be too vulgar." An aesthete and self-proclaimed "individualist," Gibson enjoyed drama and cultivated his ties to Boston's elite as well as to England's upper classes. (He even spoke with an affected English accent.) In his study, his books *Among French Country Inns* and *The Wounded Eros* lie out amid tomes on ancient ruins and European masterworks. The walls are hung with depictions of coats of arms,

along with the Gibson family crest, and a framed invitation, requesting Gibson's presence in 1906 at the White House wedding of Alice Roosevelt, which came from her father. Framed thank-you notes from Winston Churchill and Queen Elizabeth II, both recipients of his poetic tributes, are on dis-

play in his dressing room. "He wants us to know 'I'm well-connected,'" museum guide Katie Schinabeck says during a recent tour. "The more you learn, the more you see the complexity of his character, and that makes him human. I like him for that."

Amid the bids to impress, one senses a genuine love of all things genteel, especially as embodied by his mother. Rosamond Warren Gibson descended from a paternal line of doctors (e.g., John Warren, founder of Harvard Medical School); her mother was a Crowninshield, one of the most enterprising merchant families in early America.

She died in 1934. By then Gibson "was dedicated to keeping everything exactly as she had left it" at the house, says Schinabeck, "and to preserving, in his manner and dress, the lifestyle of his parents." In his later years,

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HARVARD SQUARED

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Gibson was known to walk to dinner every night at the nearby Ritz Carlton Hotel, often dressed to the nines in a top hat and tuxedo under his big raccoon coat. Some neighbors dubbed him “Mr. Boston.”

JUST INSIDE THE MUSEUM, dark walnut double doors shut out the sunny modern day. The first-floor rooms are framed in the same carved walnut woodwork; landscape paintings hang in gilded frames; the mahogany dining table is set with gold-rimmed Haviland Limoges china. Heading upstairs, Schinabeck points out the central heating system. The circular shaft rises from a central opening in the second-floor ceiling, providing a view of the sky and allowing warm air from the lower floors to flow into the upper stories through glass vents etched with stars.

Such cutting-edge amenities (along with indoor plumbing—a modern sewage system was part of the new neighborhood’s infrastructure) were installed by Charles Gibson’s grandmother, Catherine Hammond Gibson. She was a widow with one son, Charles Hammond Gibson Sr., who

was in his twenties when she bought the lot in the burgeoning luxury development and built the house in 1859-60. “She hoped it would help her son attract a suitable wife,” explains Swanton. Meanwhile, the Back Bay was expanding; gravel fill arrived day and night by the trainload from Needham, Massachusetts. The massive public-works project would continue for another four decades, eventually reclaiming 570 acres. Boston’s wealthy families were drawn by the Parisian-styled grid of tree-lined streets and Commonwealth Avenue’s gracious park. In time, “almost everyone who lived in the Back Bay was somehow related,” says Swanton, “or was friends with your relatives.” Catherine Gibson’s nephew built an almost identical house next door. (Isabella Stewart Gardner’s father built her a home on the next block.)

By 1871, Charles Sr. had married well—to Rosamond Warren. They moved in with his mother, and soon produced Charles Jr., Mary Ethel, and Rosamond. (When the sisters married in the 1910s, they lived in Back Bay homes of their own.)

After her mother-in-law died in 1888, Rosamond Gibson redecorated parts of the house. She put the “Japanese Leather Wallpaper” in the entrance hall, and redid the second-floor music room in the more modern, lighter and simpler Aesthetic style:

Cooking in the house ended in the mid 1930s; the kitchen, with its soapstone sink and 1884 cast-iron oven, manufactured by Smith & Anthony Stove Co., Boston, is especially well preserved.



Rosamond Gibson's bedroom, which was redecorated by her mother in 1871, features soft colors, family portraits, and a 15-piece bird's-eye maple bedroom set carved to look like bamboo.

white woodwork with rose- and gold-patterned wallpaper. Her own bedroom was redecorated by her mother, Anna Crowninshield, as a wedding gift.

As a young man, Charles Jr. traveled, socialized, and wrote. Some of his books were published by vanity presses, but his chronicle of castles and churches in France, *Two Gentlemen of Touraine*, which appeared under a pseudonym in 1899, became a standard text. *The Wounded Eros* contains passionate sonnets about love found and lost, but no mention of a woman. Some people have debated his sexual orientation. "He was a very eccentric lifelong bachelor, a poet and an author; we have no proof or documentation that he was gay or not," says Swanton. "In a way, I feel we should respect his privacy and let others draw their own conclusions as they wish."

After his father died, in 1916, Gibson moved back home to live with his mother. By then he was likely ending a two-year ap-



pointment as Boston's parks commissioner, Swanton says, and had designed a "convenience station" for Boston Common based on the Petit Trianon at Versailles. Once built, however, the pink-granite rotunda (most recently reopened as a restaurant) caused controversy; some on the city's Art Commission accused him of using the proj-

ect to promote himself and his tastes. According to Swanton, Gibson had little formal training; he had attended MIT's School of Architecture, but never graduated, as he often led people to believe.

"He was aware of legacy," she adds, "and he worked very hard to create a persona, wanting everyone to believe he was ex-



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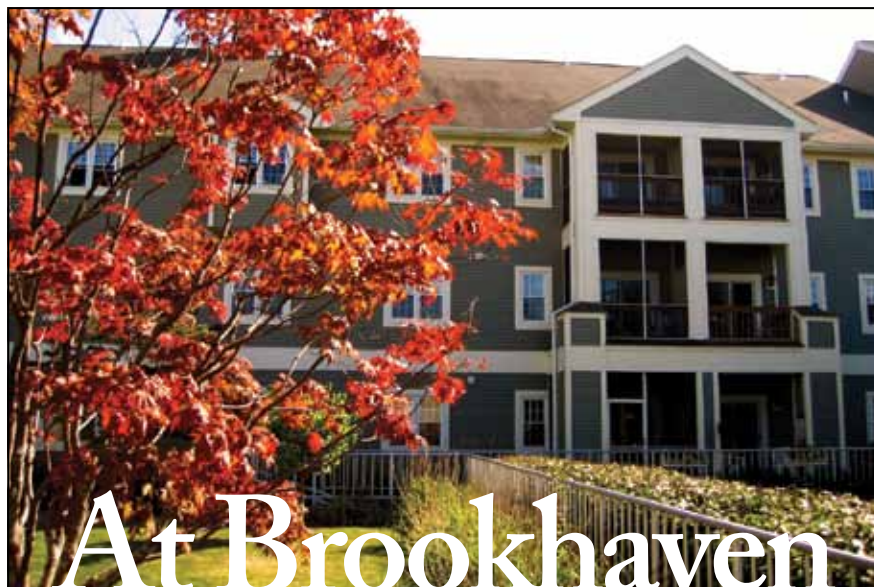
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From left: The music room, a family gathering spot, holds many treasures, such as the Japanese apothecary chest and a lithophane lamp from Germany; a circa 1916 portrait of the ever-dapper Charles Gibson Jr.

tremely well-educated and wealthy." His financial status, especially after the Depression hit, is not clear. Certainly public beautification projects were no longer a priority. By the early 1930s and 1940s, reports Suffolk University history professor Robert Allison, A.L.B.'87, Ph.D. '92, the economy and changing city demographics had prompted many Beacon Hill and Back Bay families to move to the suburbs. If their homes had not already been chopped up into rooming houses and apartments, sold to institutions, or simply left vacant, he says, they would be within in a few decades. "Back Bay had been the real preserve of Brahmanism," he adds. "For someone like Charles Gibson, there are so many ways in which he was being marginalized." The 1950 *Herald* article reported that Gibson "deplores the foibles of the age, an age in which he sees the heights of aristocracy being leveled into plains where all men are considered alike. While he often gets cross about all this, he can laugh at it, too."

Perhaps because money was scarce, or he was grieving, or both, Gibson dismissed the servants after his mother died. Within a few years he was living in only a portion of the house; the other rooms were already roped off, awaiting display. Visitors were treated to "martinis and stale bread on the stairway,"

Swanton says, "because he didn't want people sitting on the furniture." He also wrote notes and tagged furniture, artwork, and personal items for future stewards, she adds, "obviously concerned that the world

was leaving him behind." Gibson's personal sensitivities led him to preserve the home as a historic record, for what it revealed about the way of life he revered. In 1992, the Boston Landmarks Commission honored his foresight by designating the interior a rare and unique surviving example of an intact Back Bay row house. In the end, Gibson was important because he was right.

CURIOSITIES: A Delicate Power

Born in India and raised in Paris, Shantala Shivalingappa is among the world's best practitioners of Kuchipudi, a classical narrative dance from South India rarely performed in Boston. "It is so complete," she says of the form. "It has force and grace, strength and fluidity, rhythm and melody, speed and stillness." She adds, "What is difficult is bringing all this together in a good balance and doing justice to each." She performs this feat throughout *Akasha* (the Sanskrit word means "sky" or "space"), her five-part solo program. "Inconceivable by mind, imperceptible to senses, it pervades, as well as holds and contains, all that exists," she notes. It is a "dreamscape" that generates "the music and movement of the piece." On stage, Shivalingappa takes the audience on a transformative trip to meet Hindu gods, embodying the wild range of these primordial beings with a superhuman precision. Every movement, from the tilt of her toes to the dart of an eye, demands delicacy, even as she squats, jumps, and swivels as

the fearsome Shiva, her favorite deity. Four musicians accompany Shivalingappa, and sometimes she sings. Yet her freeze-frame shapes resonate more deeply. The idea, she says, is to move viewers beyond mere understanding—to "touch their hearts and leave them with a flow." She hopes for "a privileged moment of sharing of that intense energy and emotion that are intrinsic to this style...to create something that takes you out of yourself, and lets you feel, for a moment, greater and lighter, and a sense of togetherness, of 'oneness.'"



Shantala Shivalingappa

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