

Irene Langhorne Gibson 1873-1956

Irene Langhorne was born to Chiswell (Chillie) Langhorne and Nannie (Nanaire) Witcher in Danville, Virginia in 1873. Her father, a Virginian gentleman and Civil War veteran, struggled for a living in Danville working as a tobacco auctioneer. He and his wife raised nine children, all of whom, with the exception of the youngest daughter Nora, experienced considerable poverty. It was not until Colonel Langhorne became a railroad manager, through a lucky personal contact, that the family moved to "Mirador," their estate in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Of the nine children, the girls seemed to possess the edge in both personality and numbers, and it was through this advantage that so many of them were able to find success. Irene Gibson's most famous sibling was Lady Nancy Astor, the first woman to sit in the British Parliament.

Irene Langhorne became noticeable in society when, in the early years of Reconstruction after the Civil War, she frequented Northern ballrooms where she quickly became an icon of fashion and femininity. It was there that she met the Yankee artist Charles Dana Gibson, and the two married in 1895. The successful artist and illustrator immortalized her by using her as his model for the famed "Gibson Girl." The "Gibson Girl" debuted in the 1890's and has been called the most expressive icon of its time. Americans fell in love with the character, and the independent spirit she represented. The "Gibson Girl" was a familiar sight in American homes and advertisements.

Irene Langhorne Gibson did indeed possess that same vigorous spirit. She had a zest for politics and supported the women's suffrage movement. After receiving Irene Gibson at the White House in 1945, Eleanor Roosevelt said of her and her family, "All of the Langhorne sisters are people one has to notice!" She lectured on the same circuit with figures like Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances Perkins, and was not only a model of female beauty, but also of intellect and equality.

For further information the Museum recommends:

Gibson, Langhorne, Jr. "Dash and Drama: Irene Langhorne Gibson, 1873-1956."
Virginia Cavalcade 47 Winter 1998: 4-13.