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The Unexpected Symbol of the New Woman: Ella Ferris Pell's *Salome*

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The Unexpected Symbol of the New Woman:

Ella Ferris Pell’s *Salome*

Megan Ashley Snow

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The Unexpected Symbol of the New Woman:
Ella Ferris Pell’s *Salome*

Megan Ashley Snow
Department of Comparative Arts and Letters, BYU
Master of Arts

This thesis argues that Ella Ferris Pell’s 1890 painting, *Salome*, provides a unique interpretation of the ideals of the New Woman, specifically in terms of reclaiming female power through Salome’s confidence in her sexuality. By examining the cultural context in which Pell exhibited her painting, as well as her background as an artist, I hope to bring to light the significant ways in which Pell’s *Salome* participates in the construction of the New Woman in late nineteenth-century culture. Since Pell was an American woman who trained and exhibited in both the United States and France, this paper explores the significance of the New Woman in both countries. Through the examination of these ideas, we can better appreciate the ways in which Pell approached her painting and why it was not well received in Paris—despite its popular subject matter, technical execution, and relevance to the prevalent topic of the women’s movement. Drawing upon the rich visual culture of this era, I offer a comparative study of how both images of women and actual women embraced sexuality and femininity as a means of exerting influence over men, and by so doing, carved out a sphere of influence in a male-dominated society.

Keywords: Ella Ferris Pell, Salome, woman artist, New Woman, fin de siècle, United States, France, Sarah Bernhardt, Gibson Girl, femme fatale
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Introduction

At the turn of the twentieth century, the art scene in the United States and France was a dynamic and fluid space filled with men and women exchanging ideas across mediums and borders. While only a couple hundred Americans exhibited in the Paris Salons from 1800-1870, more than a thousand took part in the Paris exhibitions from 1872-1899. American artists recognized the importance of acceptance at the Salons. French and American artists played a vital part in the life of the great city of Paris, a role that helped shape and bring prestige to a modern nation. Despite facing institutional structures that inhibited their work, women artists made up about 20 percent of the total number of Salon artists (but less than 10 percent of award winners). Many French and American women artists formed their own support systems. And more American women than ever before were enabled to become professional artists as they continued their academic training and exhibiting at the Salon.

Additionally, this period witnessed an increased cultural exploration of sex roles. In France, women were commonly identified with sexuality, even being referred to as “the sex” as though men were not sexed beings. Since politics were considered an “asexual” domain, the idea that women were the sexual beings implied that “woman” and “public life” did not mix. In the United States, an established code of labels, traits, and names described types of women with specific behaviors and appearances that were “all meant to fascinate both men and women at the

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2 Ibid, 114.
3 Ibid, 135.
4 Ibid, 137.
same time as they redefined who women were, or could be, outside of their homes.”

But the discussion of advanced late nineteenth-century thinkers explored gender roles and sexuality and recognized women’s ability to experience sexual pleasure and fulfillment; even addressing the psychological and biological harmfulness of celibacy. There were physicians who promoted the idea that women needed sexual intercourse. In fact, one stated that, “the evil results of abstinence are especially noticeable in women.”

It was from this context that the New Woman emerged, with her rejection of many conventional ideas concerning women’s roles and spheres of influence. These primarily urban and middle-class “New Women” appeared in a variety of guises. Some remained single, while others entered nontraditional marriages. Some were prominent feminist political activists, while others entered into the professions of medicine, law, journalism and teaching. What united this diverse group of women was the unconventionally public way in which they lived their lives and their rejection of traditional gender roles in their societies.

Many of these “New Women” reclaimed a sense of power by embracing their sexuality. Rather than abiding by the idea that women were the keepers of morality and purity, these women recognized the influence they could achieve in society by highlighting their sexuality and femininity. Many women rejected the strict categorizations from the early nineteenth-century between the good girl from the bad, the Madonna from the whore, the True Woman from the untrue. These moral categories became blurred and complicated during the early twentieth

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7 Elaine Showalter, Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle (New York: Penguin Group, 1990), 21.
8 Ibid.
century. This previous delineation between a “True Woman” or “un-true” often resulted with most men (and some women) portraying female sexuality in exaggerated and perverse ways. Yet this is why it was that much more significant when women reclaimed their sexuality as a source of pride.

It was this specific aspect of the New Woman that the American artist Ella Ferris Pell (1846-1922) captured in her 1890 painting Salome (figure 1), which she exhibited that same year in the French Salon. This Orientalist single-figure composition presents Salome standing confidently before the viewer, somewhat disdainfully gazing at St. John the Baptist’s head. The light emanating from his head illuminates her figure. Pell’s work offered a perspective in which the infamous Salome was not threatening because she was blatantly violent or sexually perverse, like many of her contemporary sister Salomes were. Instead, as part of this New Woman movement, Pell’s painting helped carve out a space for Salome wherein she could be a powerful female, who could be uninterested in men or even disdainful towards men—and who was control of her mind and body. This perspective is important, not only for offering a new understanding of the significance of Pell’s painting, but also in highlighting the difficult but important ways in which women worked to redeem sexuality by walking the fine line between empowered sexuality and objectified femininity.

Previous scholarship has explored how Pell’s painting differs from contemporary treatments of Salome, who depicted her as a blood-lusting animal, hungry for the head of John the Baptist. Bram Dijkstra argued that Pell’s painting is significant in its lack of perverse

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12 See Bram Dijkstra’s *Idols of Perversity* for an in-depth discussion on the many ways women were artistically portrayed as aggressive and murderous femme fatales who threatened men and society as a whole. Though Dijkstra’s work has been criticized for over-simplifying fin de siècle culture, his work nonetheless provides an expansive overview of artistic renditions exploring the horrifying and threatening side of sexual women.
aggressiveness and emphasis on realistic humanness.\textsuperscript{13} Similarly, Holly Edwards also observed that Pell’s interpretation of Salome was uncharacteristically strong and self-possessed, as the painting reflected Pell’s own confidence in her ability as an independent woman and artist.\textsuperscript{14} Expanding on these ideas raised by Dijkstra and Edwards, this paper will focus on how Pell’s \textit{Salome} is not a stand-alone painting but actually fits within a larger movement of that day—a movement that inspired women to question traditional ideas about womanhood and independence. Through this lens, Pell’s painting may be seen as submitting that women could be powerful through their sexuality and, by embracing it, could overcome the social stigmas that sought to shame women for their bodies. As will be demonstrated, her \textit{Salome}, which was exhibited in the Salon of 1890 in Paris, merged the American and French ideas regarding the New Woman in ways similar to the American “Gibson Girl” and the French actress Sarah Bernhardt, both of whom were examples of women who reclaimed sexuality by asserting control of situations by utilizing both their minds and bodies in ways that demonstrated a willingness to challenge social expectations.

\textbf{The New Woman: France and America}

\textit{I hate the phrase “New Woman.” Of all the tawdry, run-to-heel phrases this strikes me the most disagreeably. When you mean, by the term, the women who believe in and ask for the right to advance in education, the arts, and professions with their fellow men, you are speaking of a phase in civilization which has come gradually and naturally, and is here to stay. There is nothing new or abnormal in such a woman. But when you confound}

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her with the extremists who wantonly disown the obligations and offices with which
nature has honored them, you do the earnest, progressive women great wrong.\textsuperscript{15}

The New Woman of the \textit{fin de siècle} had multiple identities. She was, variously, a
feminist activist, a social reformer, a popular novelist, a suffragist playwright, a woman poet.
She was also often a fictional construct, a discursive response to the activities of the late
nineteenth-century women’s movement.\textsuperscript{16} The New Woman met with criticism on many sides
for the perceived ways in which she upset the normal social order. Specifically in France, these
New Women were branded as a symbol of domestic disarray. They were either promiscuous,
self-absorbed, irresponsible individuals who neglected their maternal responsibilities and
intruded into the area of financial and critical rewards once reserved exclusively for men, or on
the opposite end, seen as a “sexless hag.”\textsuperscript{17} Jules Simon, an influential French writer on women,
argued: “Everything about the woman—her body, her spirit, her character—has been conceived
by nature’s author as a preparation for maternity.”\textsuperscript{18} He went on to warn that, “Life is good,
salutary, happy, as long as the mother and wife stays in the place that nature has destined and

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\textsuperscript{15} Emma Wolf, \textit{The Joy of Life} (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1896), 8. “Author of five novels, poetry, and short fiction, Emma Wolf (b. 1865–d. 1932) was the first American Jewish writer published by the popular and important presses of her time—Henry Holt, A. C. McClurg, and Harper & Bros. Oxford Bibliographies. Wolf’s other three novels as well as the ten short stories she published in the New York magazine \textit{The Smart Set} focus on the rapid social changes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that brought about the “new woman” and all of the complications and decisions that emerged from that role.” Barbara Cantalupo, “Emma Wolf,” \textit{Oxford Bibliographies}, March 30, 2015, http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199827251/obo-9780199827251-0109.xml
\textsuperscript{16} Sally Ledger, \textit{The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle} (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1997), 1.
\textsuperscript{17} This discussion from Janis Bergman-Carton’s “Conduct Unbecoming: Daumier and Les Bas-Bleus” is focused on
what she calls the “woman of ideas”—a French woman who recognizes and utilizes the power of words to influence public opinion. She does not use the term to refer to the scores of talented women with careers in painting and music, for she argued that these were areas in which women were able to function more easily without challenging male assessments of the feminine nature. Since Ella Ferris Pell is an American artist working in France she would not necessarily have been subject to all of the criticisms discussed in this section. However, these are crucial points to address to fully paint the context in which these women were operating in their various spheres and, more importantly, to understand the ideas that Pell’s audience had already been exposed to. Janis Bergman-Carton, “Conduct Unbecoming: Daumier and Les Bas-Bleus, in \textit{Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism}, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 203-215.
\end{flushleft}
God has made for her.” His ideas emphasized that women had a very specific but limited role in the home. He conditioned the happiness of women upon being wives and mothers who stayed in their place and did not upset the “natural” balance in the home or society. In the context of declining births, reproduction and the continuation of the family was a woman’s primary source of cultural value.

Working as a self-professed artist, a New Woman (such as Ella Ferris Pell) might be found wanton and a traitor to the delicacies of her sex, or subject to the same criticism as the suffragette. For she “wanted a life of her own beyond traditional domesticity.”

A lot of what was published and produced intended to criticize the New Woman, as demonstrated by this satirical photograph showing a woman in pants with a cigarette in her mouth, standing triumphantly with one leg up on a chair (figure 2). In this image, we see the woman’s husband, hunched over a bucket of laundry and looking up at her submissively. The bicycle behind her symbolizes her newfound freedom, sense of power, and even heightened sexuality. In France, Marcel Proust linked the bicycle with female immorality, and a claim for independence that was already “tiresome.” The debate around female cycling centered on normative patterns of femininity since public acceptance hinged on whether a particular activity was compatible with the “poorly defined by compelling distinction between ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ pursuits.”

The image warned viewers that the change in gender dynamics was threatening towards men and unattractive in women. In the United States, the New Woman faced similar criticism.

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19 Ibid, 25.
23 Foley, *Women in France since 1789*, 160.
24 Ibid, 160.
As Henry T. Finck wrote: “If the so-called New Woman, who is so eager to support herself and to be a barber and a day laborer and everything that man is, had any sense of humor, she would see in the mirror of these anthropologic and historic facts that she is in reality very old-fashioned, primitive, and a crab-like sort of woman. Like the sqaw and the peasant woman, she has taken to smoking again…” Additionally, the American New Woman was sometimes accused of being the unattractive usurper of masculine roles and sexual freedom. It is the aspect of sexual freedom that set apart the American New Woman and elicited anxiety in those committed to the prescribed gender roles of the day.

While criticism of the New Woman was often negative, it also provided her with a forum to express her own opinion; “for by ‘naming’ and thenceforward largely ridiculing and attacking the New Woman, the editors and hacks of the periodical press unwittingly prised open a discursive space for her.” This space was quickly filled by sympathetic—not antagonistic—feminist productions, with the claims of the New Woman and her sisters in the late nineteenth-century women’s movement.

American-born Ella Ferris Pell studied and trained in both the United States and France, and her own experiences and education exemplify her “New Woman” background. Before going abroad to study, she studied with William Rimmer at the Design School for Women at the New York Cooper Union. One of Rimmer’s strengths as a teacher was his knowledge of the human

26 Patterson, Beyond the Gibson Girl, 2.
27 Ledger, The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle, 9.
28 Ibid.
body. He practiced medicine from 1848 to 1863, and later lectured on artistic anatomy. Rimmer’s knowledge of the human body was a helpful resource for Pell as she trained as an artist. Pell developed many skills as a painter, a sculptor, and an illustrator. Also in New York City, she was the vice-president of the Ladies’ Art Association and president of the Liberal Art League. Her transatlantic travels and training were influential for the art she produced. Part of her academic training involved going to Paris for continued, rigorous study. Kristen Swinth observed that for women artists, “to study academic art in Paris was to claim a male prerogative as their own.”

Reclaiming Sexuality: The Gibson Girl, Sarah Bernhardt, and Salome

The image of Salome, of a girl who murders through her charm, beauty and dance, became one of the most popular images of the femme fatale, the symbol of the beautiful destroyer. The nineteenth century produced some 2,789 works of art and literature in which Salome is the central figure. This image played a crucial role in creating the myth of women in the period.

Unlike so many of the images catalogued in Dijkstra’s canonical Idols of Perversity, Pell’s Salome literally painted a picture of the American New Woman’s embrace of female sexuality. In her painting, Salome was not threatening because she could be violent, but more so because of her disregard for men. Salome’s body is illuminated by John the Baptist’s head, which, although not included in the painting, holds Salome’s gaze. The warm light bathes her

arm, face, and dress and highlights the pink tones in her cheeks. Her gold accessories and the silver platter both catch the light and emphasize her femininity. Her voluptuously long, red hair cascades down her back and is completely swept behind her to allow the viewer complete access to her face. Her full cheeks, smooth skin, and exposed breast indicate that though she is young, she is fully developed.

Additionally, Salome’s exposed breast also indicates Pell’s awareness of the symbolic meaning of the breast and the complicated discussion surrounding it. The exposed breast could refer to larger categories of sexuality, maternity, or allegory. Breast imagery appealed not only to men but to women as well, for their attachment to their own sexuality was invested in them. As Madelyn Gutwirth notes: “The female breast, so anchored in our experience of intimacy—maternal and sexual—is also the most public and ideological signifier available to channel private drives, via representation, into modes congenial to power.”34 This idea of power strengthens the argument that Pell’s interpretation of Salome shows her to be an empowered sexual woman. Her exposed breast, in this framework, represents her sexuality as a source of independence. In his review from the London-based art magazine Apollo, D. Farmer stated about the artist’s painting: “[Pell’s] Salome, submitted to the 1890 Salon, shows the influence of Henri Laurens and is surprisingly lush and erotic for someone whose diary entries suggest a proper middle-class woman.”35 This observation highlights the sexual nature of the painting. But Pell’s depiction of Salome does not cross the line and turn Salome into a perversely sexual aggressor. The educated and “proper” Pell emphasized Salome’s physicality as a source of confidence, ability, and control.

Pell’s decision to expose one breast was not unique; rather this artistic decision was in keeping with especially French traditions to use the exposed breast as a symbol. The allegorical figure of Liberty, from the 1889 *The Triumph of the Republic* (figure 3) by Jules Aimé Dalou, which drew upon the style of Delacroix’s 1830 *Liberty Leading the People* (figure 4), also featured an exposed breast. Speaking of the significance of this, Marina Warner wrote:

By exposing vulnerable flesh as if it were not so, and especially by uncovering the breast, the softest and most womanly part of woman, as if it were invulnerable, the semi-clad female figure expresses strength and freedom. The breast that it reveals to our eyes carries multiple meanings, clustered around two major themes. It presents itself as a zone of power, through a primary connotation of vitality as the original sustenance of infant life, and secondly, though by no means secondarily, through the erotic invitation it extends, only to deny.  

Seen in this way, Pell recognized the ways in which sexuality provided Salome with an otherwise inaccessible source of independence from and power over her male counterparts. She built Salome’s exposed breast into her costume in order to portray Salome’s spirit—strong, fierce, and desirable. While Pell’s version of Salome did not have Dalou’s and Delacroix’s direct references to the allegorical figure of Liberty, she nonetheless seems to pull from the similar symbolic meanings of the slipped chiton.

Similarly, Pell’s painting of Salome emphasizes the similar characteristics of a lack of constraint, liberation, and wildness that the French associated with women. This focus on the exposed breast unveils another layer of significance to Pell’s work. As a team of scholars on female sexuality note: “Talking about what women do with their bodies, and what is done to their bodies, exposes and threatens the careful social construction of disembodied sexuality. A

37 Ibid, 278.
38 Ibid, 279-280.
modest, feminine reputation requires a young woman to construct a disembodied sexuality. The woman becomes a passive body, rather than actively embodied.”39 Pell’s ability to construct her own frame for presenting the female body and female sexuality allowed her to also actively take more control of the discussion. The embrace of her sexuality allows Salome to act independently. While the viewer’s gaze is on Salome, her gaze is upon the dismembered head. The head perhaps also acts as an unseen symbol of her power.

Significantly, the focus in Pell’s *Salome* is on Salome’s figure and especially her face, adding focus to her sensuality. Her Salome stands tall and confident. Though dressed well, her gold jewelry and cream and gold drapery are simple in design. Her left arm is extended and balances the silver platter resting gingerly on her left thigh. Her right arm crosses her body and rests atop her left forearm. The simplicity of her attire directs the viewer’s attention to both Salome’s face and to the platter. Her face is beautiful, with a mix of confidence and arrogance, and creates an air of almost contempt; she is in complete control of herself and the situation.

The technical skill showcased in Salome’s figure exemplified Pell’s talent and education as an American artist. At this time, female nudes in American paintings were relatively rare and generally mediocre in execution.40 This was due partly to the fact that many American artists in Pell’s day lacked the necessary skill to correctly represent the human form. Additionally, many American artists lacked an appreciative audience. American artists’ Salon paintings of female figures therefore, “constituted a new level of achievement for American art, especially as some of their works won appreciation from the masters of the genre, the French.”41 Having learned

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41 Ibid.
from capable instructors with a great knowledge of the human form, Pell’s technically masterful depiction of Salome’s form speaks to her skills and knowledge, both as an American artist and as a female artist. As a contemporary art critic Edgar Mayhew Bacon stated: “The ‘Salome’ of Miss Ella F. Pell's creation is an admirable picture and may well be considered her finest general achievement.” While her approach to Salome’s story was not well received in France, her technical skill was nevertheless apparent.

Pell’s own analysis of her painting provides greater insight into the complexity of Salome’s story. One unique aspect of Pell’s painting is that John the Baptist’s head is uncharacteristically absent from the painting. Rather, Salome is staring downwards and to her right at the unseen illuminated and decapitated head. In this moment, her silver platter is still empty. Speaking of her own painting, as quoted in Bacon’s article, Pell stated the following:

Although not the greatest, I consider it one of my important works. It was painted in Paris and exhibited in the Salon of 1890. I brought it to New York, and the following year showed it at the Spring Academy Exhibition. Since then it has been displayed in Western cities. The picture represents Salome at the moment when she first discovers the head of John the Baptist. The purely physical nature of Salome revolts against the ugliness of the decapitated head. She is unable to perceive the spiritual light emanating from it, a light which illuminates herself, and by which alone she is visible in history.

Pell observes that Salome is judged by history for her involvement with St. John the Baptist’s death. And the last part of her statement seems to indicate a degree of sympathy for Salome. In fact, her statement touches on an important issue with women and how Christianity traditionally viewed them.

These perceptions, as summarized by art historian Daniel Arasse, are categorized in the three female types into which women were fit. The first type is Eve, the source of original sin. The second is Mary, the mother of Christ and the anti-Eve. The third is Mary Magdalene, who is

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43 Ibid.
a passage from Eve to Mary. If Pell’s Salome cannot perceive the spiritual light, then from a traditional Christian standpoint she is simply another example of an evil “Eve” figure. Though beautiful, she was manipulative, aggressive, and ultimately destructive; she was described as “the archetypal femme fatale.” She represented a vicious, dangerous sexuality that was equated with the increasing freedoms demanded by the New Woman.44

But Pell’s depiction of Salome does not fit perfectly into any of those three categories. She is not excused from her actions but she is also not condemned, at least by Pell, for them. Rather, she is a confident woman who, though guilty, is not shown in a shameful way. While she cannot understand the spiritual nature of John the Baptist, and is judged by history for her act, she is nevertheless a strong woman. By presenting a Salome who was not ashamed of her beauty and who did not fear men, Pell’s painting champions a very specific strain of the New Woman. Bram Dijsktra argued that there is no more powerful indicator of how a society perceives itself than through its art.45 In this painting, Pell successfully indicated the way in which many New Women perceived their sense of independence.

As Dijkstra described, Pell’s Salome was “the realistic portrait of a young, strong, and radiantly self-possessed woman who looks upon the world around her with confidence, with a touch of arrogance.”46 Pell’s flesh and blood Salome is confidently sensual; a trait seen in both the Gibson Girl and Sarah Bernhardt, who will be explored in the following section. Like these other women, Pell’s Salome reclaimed power through her sexuality and ability to understand and even manipulate men. While such an avenue for power can be problematic, for it risks reducing women to objects and associating their value with their sexuality, the realization that sexuality in

45 Dijkstra, Idols of Perversity, 391.
46 Ibid, 392.
women could be empowering challenged traditional views and created a new way for women to recognize their influence in society by turning what was so often a source of shame into a source of confidence. Audre Lorde explains this ideological perspective in stating:

The erotic has been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic.47

Lorde’s idea of the erotic, which she defines broadly to refer to a sense of self, women’s strongest feelings, and an internal sense of satisfaction which women can continually aspire, empowers women when they allow themselves to embrace these emotions in all aspects of life—not just sex. She wrote: “In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depressions, self-denial.”48 Salome in Pell’s painting can be viewed as having rejected feelings of powerlessness or resignation, achieved in part through her embrace of her body. Similarly, Kathy Davis argued that women’s epistemic agency is what allows them to deliberately and strategically make decisions about their lives to actively pursue potentially empowering courses of action. This is largely due to women understanding their bodies and their embodied experiences.49 Again, a similar engagement with the female body, female independence, and female empowerment can be seen in Pell’s Salome. While these third-wave feminist ideas are being expressed hundreds of years after Pell’s painting, her painting can nevertheless be seen as exploring similar ideas regarding female sexuality and strength.

48 Dijkstra, Idols of Perversity, 281.
While positive ideas about the female body and sexuality are often associated with current feminist theory, the conservative Victorian ideas regarding modesty and repression of sexuality were already being challenged. As part of the changing social dynamic that accompanied the emergence of the New Woman, young single women became a powerful representation of the New Woman—a development in which Pell’s *Salome* took part. The growing number of single and working women fostered an environment in which the American artist Charles Dana Gibson would market his “Gibson Girl.” In 1889, Gibson studied with artist George du Maurier in England, and upon returning to the United States in 1890, he began drawing the Gibson Girl: a lively, usually single, and statuesque society woman who would captivate American attention.50 This figure has been described as “a tall woman in a shirtwaist and skirt, her hair in a large, loose chignon, her lips small and pouty, her nose a button or straight, her skin the whiteness of the paper. She looked confident and a bit aloof, her gaze generally not on those around her but off to the side. This face created an epitome of distant perfection—of “glamour.”51 And so Gibson’s tall, beautiful, and aloof female defined the woman that American men would desire to have and that American women would desire to be.

Gibson’s illustration for a book cover, *A Widow and her Friends* (figure 5), perfectly exemplifies the looks his “Girls” were famous for: eyelids partly closed and her gaze cast to the side, her hair piled on top of her head; her bare neck drawing the viewer’s attention to her beautiful face. Gibson’s pen-and-ink drawing of the Gibson Girl offered a popular version of the New Woman. This image had a paradoxical effect, as it both “sanctified and undermined women’s desires for progressive sociopolitical change and personal freedom at the turn of the

In some instances, Gibson’s drawings poked fun at these New Women, while at other times his drawings supported their ideals. He helped redefine the traditional practices of courting, marrying, and leaving home. But some of his images, such as his 1906 illustration “In the Swim” (figure 6), focus more on these women as the femme fatale. In this drawing, the drowning man had almost reached his allusive Gibson Girl. Yet all we see are his hands clawing at the air; his body already sinking underwater.

Both images explore the ambiguous way sexuality could empower women. The ambiguity in Gibson’s images helped emphasize the idea that the Gibson Girl, this New Woman, was desirable in her physicality and sexuality but dangerous in her aloofness and independence. It was the same ideas that Pell’s painting explored. And Salome’s face is strikingly similar to this Gibson Girl’s face; both have small, pouty lips, white skin, and disdainful but confident gazes. Pell’s Salome and the Gibson Girl mirror the same characteristics of beauty, disdain, confidence, and control. These women did not subscribe to the idea that sexuality was wrong or that a woman’s purpose was to be the pure, moral beacon of society. Instead, they welcomed the freedom and independence they found by leaning into their physicality and refusing to let men control them. The artist’s creation of the Gibson Girl popularized the idea of the beautiful American New Woman.

It is important to note that Gibson’s drawings of the Gibson Girls were somewhat difficult to characterize in relationship to the New Woman because he focused on a specific view of how women achieved power and influence. But within that focus, his girls reclaimed their sexuality in a generally wholesome yet powerful manner. As Patterson argued: “Even though

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53 Ibid, 29.
picturing women drinking and smoking was uncharacteristic of Gibson, his images almost invariably promoted a measure of women’s personal proliferation and appeal of her image, and the bevy of imitations her success sparked makes her image the most influential version of the New Woman.”

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a contemporary of Gibson, praised the Gibson Girl as a symbol of the New Woman’s progress and growing freedom from the sexual-economic relationship with men:

The Gibson Girl and the Duchess of Towers,—these are the new women; and they represent a noble type, indeed. The heroines of romance and drama today are of a different sort from the Evelinas and Arabellas of the last century. … The false sentimentality, the false delicacy, the false modesty, the utter falseness of elaborate compliment and service gallantry which went with the other falsehoods,—all these are disappearing. Women are growing honester, braver, stronger, more healthful and skillful and able and free, more human in all ways.

This growing freedom was partly achieved by Gibson’s exploration into the significance of a woman’s single life as well as her influence over men. In his image, *The Weaker Sex*, (figure 7) a tiny figure of a man pleads on his knees before four Gibson Girls, begging them to stop poking him with the needle one woman holds in her hand. The drawing emphasizes their domination and ability to critique a man and ruin his self-confidence, thereby making him “small.”

Their physical forms are typical of Gibson’s women; each woman is indistinguishable from the other. But their beauty and disinterest in the fate of the small male figure combine to create a force with which to be reckoned. The woman with the needle also hold a magnifying glass, allowing her to poke the small man more precisely. Gibson Girls in this drawing may not appear to be more than beautiful women, yet they still are more powerful than the man who is kneeling and pleading with them. This representation of Gibson Girls demonstrates how women

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55 Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, 31.
have power over men and, as the title suggests with purposeful irony, that it was perhaps the males who were the weaker sex. This image is not about achieving a “happily ever after” or fulfilling True Womanhood. Instead, it is an exploration into what is suggested as the best time, or at least most fulfilling time, in a woman’s life—that period before marriage. Gilman and others valued the strength and confidence found in representations of women such as the Gibson Girls. Indeed, the freedom and independence that these images offered presented an empowered view of womanhood.

While the Gibson Girl represented the image and ideals of the New Woman, women, like French actress and artist Sarah Bernhardt, were the living embodiment of the independent and sexual New Woman. Bernhardt was progressive, dramatic, influential, successful, well-traveled, educated, and beautiful. And as a symbol of the New Woman, she (like Salome) was a complicated woman to define. She received her education at a convent near Versailles but despite her conservative beginning, Bernhardt made her début at the Comédie Française in 1862 as an actress—a career in which she would find tremendous success (though her reception varied by region and time). In 1869, she began to study sculpture as a pupil of Mathieu Meunier, and she exhibited her work at the Salon from 1874 to 1886.

Bernhardt’s career as an actress in the late 1880s is especially important to note in its relation to both the Gibson Girl persona as well as to Ella Ferris Pell’s Salome. During this time, she took on the role of Lady Macbeth. Jean Richepan’s translation of the play was new and difficult to adapt, and Bernhardt had reservations about the quality of his prose translation. She took the production to Edinburgh to infuse some local color into the drabness of the writing.

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58 Ibid, 64.
Even though she was performing for an English audience, Bernhardt did not shy away from an unconventional interpretation of her character. As Elaine Aston notes, to the character of Lady Macbeth “she brought the wiles and seductiveness of a Cleopatra, so characteristic of her Sardou heroines.”60 Bernhardt depicted a dangerous, siren-like creature by whose fascinations men were enslaved. Although the Victorian audiences were interested in the femme fatale figure, most critics were not prepared to accept Bernhardt’s interpretation as it ran contrary to their preferred reading of the text.61

Although Bernhardt’s role as Lady Macbeth was one of her least successful, it is significant in the ways in which it paralleled the style and ideology seen in Pell’s *Salome*. Similar to Bernhardt, Pell not only chose subject matter (Salome) that was wildly popular in its time, but also chose an interpretation quite different from the traditional way that audiences understood the story. As Bram Dijkstra maintained, “Pell’s interpretation suggests a genuine distaste, a fundamental radical feminist rejection of the ideological premises of male society, a sentiment the men of her time, who preferred to play with the ideas and not confront realities, invariably found intolerable.”62 Dijkstra’s observation furthers the idea that the negative reception of these artistic interpretations had more to do with the way the characters challenged traditional readings of the stories. These women used their artistic abilities to explore ideas that challenged conventional ideas and practices. They infused their characters’ stories with new perspectives, which, though not well received, nevertheless helped them to apply ideas related to the New Woman by challenging popular ideas of what a woman could do or how she could behave.

60 Ibid, 76.
61 Ibid.
A New Woman: Ella Ferris Pell

Pell embraced the freedoms engendered by the ideology of the New Woman by refusing to let social stigmas about age prevent her from traveling the world and continuing her learning and training. After graduating from the Design School for Women in 1870, Pell traveled extensively on a five-and-a-half-year voyage to Europe, the Maghreb, and parts of the Near East with her sister Evie A. Todd, and brother Charles. In her diary that she kept during her travels, she wrote on January 18, 1876, “This is an important day in my calendar for it completes my 30th year and turns me into the era of Oldmaidism! This time is so much dreaded by all young girls and not seldom deplored by the maturer ones, but I can’t say that I feel old maidish! Life has at no time been more cheery and pleasant to me.” Writing about Pell’s travels, Holly Edwards stated:

Pell was an enterprising traveler, with a sober and antiquarian mind-set. Mesmerized by the intricacies of hieroglyphs in Egypt and awed by the sheer scale of Baalbek, she was not daunted by a headlong race with a Syrian guide down a Palestinian road, noting with satisfaction afterward that everyone was “astonished with my fearless riding.” Indeed, she seems to have been a free spirit by nineteenth-century standards, rising to the rigors of travel with considerable aplomb and recounting it all in daily entries in her travel diary.

Taking advantage of a unique and enriching culture, Pell’s experiences and training speak to the possibilities available to this self-assured, modern New Woman. When Pell moved to Paris during the late 1880s, she worked under the tutelage of three of the most highly regarded masters of academic art: Jean-Paul Laurens, one of the period’s most celebrated painters of historical subjects; Gaston Saintpierre, a technically superb painter specializing in Orientalist single-figure

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64 Ella Ferris Pell, diary, 1872-78, 2: 375, quoted in Edwards, Noble Dreams: Wicked Pleasures, 140. The four-volume journal dating from 1872 to 1878 is in the collection of Fort Ticonderoga, New York.
65 Ella Ferris Pell, diary, 1872-78, 2: 211, quoted in Edwards, Noble Dreams: Wicked Pleasures, 140.
compositions; and Fernand Humbert, a highly regarded painter of society portraits. Later on in her career, the Paris Salon accepted three of Pell’s paintings from 1889-90, *The Angel Making Adam See the Consequences of His Sin* (1898), *Portrait of Mme T.*, and *Salome* (1890).

Educated, talented, and well-traveled woman, Pell’s experiences as a New Woman allowed her to contribute to the ongoing discussion of what a New Woman could do or be. Her *Salome* offered a unique perspective of the Biblical story while still taking part in a larger movement to remove the negative stereotypes surrounding female sexuality and femininity.

**Biblical Salome**

Although Pell’s *Salome* appeared in a long line of artistic interpretations of the character, Salome’s story originated in the Bible. Both Matthew and Mark mention her participation and contribution to John the Baptist’s death. But it is principally from the works of historian Josephus Flavius in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, written around 93 or 94 AD, where we learn that Herodias’s daughter is named Salome. However, in Josephus’s account there is no mention of Salome (by name), her dance, any involvement of Herodias, nor of any women in the execution of John. In fact, a reading of the gospel stories found in Matthew and Mark complicates the investigation of the role of Salome in the Baptist’s death. Several scholars claim that the story of Salome was a later embellishment. Salome’s time in the Bible is brief but significant. In (NIV) Matthew 14: 3-11, she is mentioned only as the daughter of Herodias:

3 Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, 4 for John had been saying to him: “It is not lawful for you to have her.” 5 Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people,

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69 Ibid, 9.
because they considered John a prophet. 6 On Herod’s birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for the guests and pleased Herod so much 7 that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. 8 Prompted by her mother, she said, “Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.” 9 The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted 10 and had John beheaded in the prison. 11 His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother.

Though her role in the biblical story is brief, it was (originally or eventually) developed as the ultimate cause of the John the Baptist’s death. While the biblical passage indicates that Salome was at least partly guilty for the death of John the Baptist, scholar Rosina Neginsky explored the textual problems from the Bible that show it was impossible for Salome to dance before the King—assuming that Herod’s court followed traditional social standards. She noted that unmarried daughters would be allowed to attend private meals but would have been required to leave the banquet once the dinner was over. It would have been historically and culturally taboo for the daughter of Herodias, the wife of the tetrarch of Galilee, to attend the rest of the banquet. Based on these societal and court standards, “it is unthinkable and unimaginable that she would perform any kind of dance, either as a child or as a young girl.”70

Despite the historical information, which indicates, that Salome’s story was greatly embellished or invented, her influence on the arts was nevertheless significant. Visual artists have long depicted the life of John the Baptist and his death. Moreover, they have been particularly drawn to the story of the dance of Salome, since its beauty contrasted so powerfully with its gruesome consequences.71 Salome progressed from a symbol of evil in the Middle Ages, to a study of feminine beauty during the Renaissance, to finally a seducer-destroyer in

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70 For a more in-depth analysis of the scriptures as well as information concerning Salome biographic details, according to Josephus’ Antiquities, see “Chapter One: History and Myth in the Biblical Story” in Neginsky, Salome: The Image of a Woman Who Never Was, 8-22. Neginsky also discusses gender roles in traditional Jewish cultures in Salome’s time.
71 Ibid, 25.
nineteenth-century art and literature. Neginsky dedicates three chapters to Salome’s progression or purpose during these different times. Her chapters on Salome are paralleled in some ways to Margarita Stocker’s treatment of Judith. In her book-length study of this biblical figure she explores the evolution of Judith’s story. Similar to Salome, Judith’s character bounced back and forth between associations of virtue and religious devotion, beauty and destructiveness, and even Orientalism and otherness. These two women actually were even conflated during the fin-de-siècle. A prime example of this is Klimt’s Judith I (figure 8), painted in 1901 and Judith II (figure 9), painted in 1909, which is also commonly referred to as Salome. This type of blurred merging of two very different women reflected the ways in which the conversations around women changed and how these paintings either intended to communicate ideas in support of or opposed to New Woman ideas.

Pell’s Salome fit into the group of artists who saw positivity and power in a woman’s sexuality, despite the fact that at the turn of the century Salome seemed to represent so much of what cultures feared a woman would become if given too much power or influence.

**Conclusion**

By exploring the similarities between Pell’s Salome, the Gibson Girls, and Sarah Bernhardt, this thesis has connected the similar avenues in which all three expanded the ways in which “New Women” could empower themselves. And in so doing, these women demonstrated that independence and power came with embracing sexuality. By examining works like these, we can perhaps better understand how various women shaped culture and a modern definition of femininity.
Although female sexuality was often overemphasized and socially condemned, these women reclaimed sexuality by refusing to be ashamed of it. Rather, they recognized the control they had over their own bodies. As part of this New Woman movement, Pell’s painting helped carve out a space for Salome in which she could be a powerful female. Pell’s ability to imbue Salome’s story with a new perspective helped shape Salome into an unlikely symbol of the New Woman. Like the Gibson Girl or Sarah Bernhardt, Pell’s *Salome* is not without its problems in regards to the New Woman. But to ignore Pell’s artistic contribution and unique interpretation of Salome’s story would overlook the significant ways in which women, and representations of women, influenced social ideas about female sexuality and independence. Because women still have to defend their sexuality and bodies from social and political opposition, the conversations and examples that these women from the nineteenth-century started have had a lasting influence on gender dynamics.
FIGURES

Figure 1. Ella Ferris Pell, *Salome*, 1890, oil on canvas, Private Collection.

Figure 2. Strohmeyer & Wyman, The New Woman – Wash Day, 1901, stereograph, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
Figure 3. Jules Dalou, *The Triumph of the Republic*, 1889, bronze, Place de la Nation, Paris.

Figure 4. Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830, oil on canvas, Louvre, Paris.
Figure 5. Charles Dana Gibson, *Gibson Girl, a Widow and Her Friends*, 1901, ink on board, book cover.

Figure 6. Charles Dana Gibson, *In the Swim*, 1906, halftone lithograph, The Gibson Book Volume I—A Collection of Published Works.
Figure 7. Charles Dana Gibson, The Weaker Sex, 1903, ink on paper, Cabinet of American Illustration (Library of Congress), Washington D.C.

Figure 8. Gustav Klimt, Judith, 1901, oil on canvas, Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, Vienna.
Figure 9. Gustav Klimt, *Judith II (Salome)*, 1909, oil on canvas, Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Cà Pesaro, Venice.
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