

“Girls and Gags”

Sexual Display and Humor in Reginald Marsh’s Burlesque Images

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Catchy slogans such as “Girls and Gags!” or “Fillies and Fun!” embellished the facades of burlesque theaters and the covers of girlie magazines during the 1930s and 1940s. Once viewers entered these darkened theaters or looked beyond the front covers, they again encountered the link between the sexualized female form and humor. On the burlesque stage, striptease acts alternated with comedy skits that often used women and their bodies as subject matter for jokes. In magazines with titles such as *Giggles* and *Titter*, the captions beneath photographic spreads of voluptuous pinups interspersed expressions of desire with one-liners.

Urban regionalist Reginald Marsh (1898–1954) created his etching *Irving Place Burlesk* (frontispiece) during this era. The print’s compositional scheme is the same one that he used in the majority of his burlesque images: one or more scantily clad female performers are isolated onstage at the far left or right, with male audience members filling the remainder of the frame. Here and there in most of Marsh’s burlesque scenes, one of the men leans forward with a lustful grin or looks to his neighbors with a knowing chuckle. But in this etching certain spectators break out into guffaws. Marsh’s decision to crop the image so that the viewer sees only a portion of what is

occurring onstage leaves the reason for these men’s outright laughter ambiguous. Are they laughing at the female performer or at a joke just made by an unpictured male comedian? If the latter is the case, why did Marsh leave out this comedian? Why did he choose to picture the woman as the only recognizable object of humor?

Irving Place Burlesk clarifies the connection between the curvaceous female body and humor that exists in most of the artist’s work and that proliferated in American popular culture between the world wars. In this essay, I aim to show through an examination of Marsh’s burlesque images and their sources that this link was vital to contemporary understandings of commercialized leisure and female sexuality. As these pictures can be read in a number of ways, this study confirms the multivalence and complexity of Marsh’s work as a whole. The distinctly grotesque flavor of his comedy and its repeated connection to sexual display suggest that the artist used humor in two ways: to capture what he saw as the particularly modern, lewd, and popular character of his subjects; and simultaneously to mediate the potential threat they raised. An exploration of the letters of Marsh’s primary patron, William Benton, reveals that the bawdy blend of sex and humor signaled a temporary escape by

Reginald Marsh, *Irving Place Burlesk*, 1929. Etching, 8 x 10 in. William Benton Museum of Art, University of Connecticut, Storrs, Gift of Helen Benton Boley ©2004 Estate of Reginald Marsh/Art Students League/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

upper-class viewers into an invigorating world of lower-class leisure; Marsh used it to fashion his own identity as a liaison with this enticingly tawdry realm.¹

Deemed “America’s Hogarth” by contemporary critics, Marsh is best known for his depictions of Coney Island amusement parks, crowded New York Streets, and gaudy, run-down burlesque houses. He focused on what he viewed as uniquely American and modern about the city: spectacle, crowds, consumer culture, and popular, democratic forms of entertainment in loud, boisterous places with relaxed attitudes toward moral propriety. Marsh was not alone in depicting these topics. Thomas Hart Benton, Edward Hopper, Mabel Dwight, Adolf Dehn, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, and Walt Kuhn all produced artwork on burlesque subjects as part of their efforts to represent urban America. But Marsh was the artist most often identified with the theme during the 1930s and 1940s (with the possible exception of Kuhn, who painted over two hundred portraits of showgirls). He devoted nearly one-third of his oeuvre to burlesque scenes, completing more than twenty-five paintings, twenty etchings and engravings, and countless ink drawings and preparatory sketches on the subject. In his fascination with this entertainment form, Marsh attended burlesque houses so frequently that the famed Minsky brothers gave him a permanent pass to one of their New York theaters. He once testified in court in burlesque’s favor, stating that it should be allowed to exist simply because it was “part of America.” He even served as a spokesperson for a mock degree-granting ceremony for stripper Gypsy Rose Lee.²

That Marsh concentrated so much of his art on burlesque is not surprising considering that his teacher Kenneth Hayes Miller told him, “[S]ex is your theme.” Indeed, Marsh included sexual display in his pictures to help capture the modern urban spirit; even in images that do not deal with an explicitly sexual locale, he

inserted buxom blondes with clinging clothes striding across the canvas, often oblivious to the viewer’s gaze. Based on the sites Marsh chose to depict, such as Coney Island and Union Square, as well as the figures’ dress and makeup, the young women he portrayed were identifiably working class. They were such a common feature in his artwork that they were dubbed “Marsh girls,” just as the “Petty girl” or “Vargas girl” described the iconic calendar pinup. These women were clearly the “other” for the Yale-educated Marsh. With a paternal grandfather who was a successful entrepreneur and a first wife with family wealth, Marsh never had to worry about supporting himself. As the artist’s friend and biographer Lloyd Goodrich phrased it, Marsh “was a member, if a somewhat misfit one, of the upper classes.” In addition, Marsh, who took a second wife in 1934 after less than a year out of wedlock, was a married man while he was making daily excursions to view and sketch burlesque performers. Based on their imagined availability and the prospect they offered for crossing class lines and breaking marital taboos, these lower-class women held a strong erotic charge for Marsh and his upper-class viewers.³

The Comic and the Grotesque

Time and again, Marsh portrayed a temptingly crude and down-to-earth sexuality, encompassing the ambivalent feelings he and his viewers had toward these women. His combination of the comic and the grotesque is not as contradictory as it first might seem; studies have found the two to be interrelated and based on similar elements of excess, randomness, and disorder. As Mary Russo, Mikhail Bakhtin, and other authors have noted, the grotesque can be defined as a set of characteristics generally attributed to threatening or marginal characters (much like those thought to inhabit burlesque theaters) to mark

their liminal status and separation from mainstream culture. While grotesque bodies are associated with the unruly and abject, the people who inhabit society's peripheries, they remain central to the normative cultural imagination. In visual and textual representations, the grotesque is often manifested in physical terms that elicit a dual reaction of disgust and desire.

Like comic bodies, grotesque bodies are out of bounds in terms of behavior—loud, raucous, inappropriate, and ill-mannered.

As with comic bodies, grotesque bodies are exaggerated and overabundant. They highlight asymmetry, orifices, and protrusions, and are often associated with activities such as sex or eating, anything that speaks of the transgression of bodily boundaries, whether between the self and the outside world or the inner body and the surface. Often the grotesque body is conceptualized in contrast to a "classical" body with its static, sleek, symmetrical, and closed form that represents the mainstream ideal and official bourgeois culture. Like comic bodies, grotesque bodies are out of bounds in terms of behavior; loud, raucous, inappropriate, and ill-mannered, they make spectacles of themselves.⁴ They are associated with the carnivalesque and with unofficial events and locations where accepted societal rules no longer apply. German historian Wolfgang Kayser notes that by the seventeenth century the term "grotesque" was used to describe anything "bizarre, strange, funny, or caricatural." Nineteenth-century scholars saw the grotesque as a subspecies of the comic, designating the more fantastic side of humor. Texts from the early to mid-twentieth century understood it as a combination of humor and horror—particularly fitting to Marsh's images. In definitions such as Bakhtin's, both humor and the

grotesque disregard standard categories and share an affinity for the disruption of structure and social order. Something or someone "out of place" can be unsettling as well as funny. In certain cases, the lines between what is terrifying, what is grotesque, and what is humorous are ill defined. This instability and crossover often appear in Marsh's work.⁵

While no one painting or print by Marsh includes every defining feature discussed above, the artist made it clear through his comments and formal choices that he relished a grotesque sensibility. He said he liked Coney Island, for example, because "it stinks of people and is earthy and real." And he told *Life* magazine in the 1950s that the New York he loved was passing away, lamenting, "The bunions and varicose veins and flat chests are gone. Now there are only Marilyn Monroes." Marsh's art could be considered a visual manifestation of the grotesque body, a body of "becoming, process and change . . . irregular, asymmetrical, and unruly."⁶ His works do not feature the tight, clean surfaces of Charles Sheeler or the barren, uncluttered cityscapes of Edward Hopper. Instead chaos, disorder, and excess reign in his compositions. Objects and figures lack clarity, lines are sketchy, and colors are either garishly bright or dark and murky. Architectural decor nears the baroque in detail and abundance. Breasts, hips, and buttocks reach exaggerated proportions.

It is significant that Marsh chose burlesque performers as subjects, for theatricality and acting, especially when overdone, are key elements of the grotesque. His decision to portray female performers is also important. As Russo has noted, women have a long-standing association with the grotesque; Western culture has historically viewed the male body as the norm and the female body as a mutated version of that norm or as a mysterious and incomprehensible other—a marginality heightened by these women's working-class status.



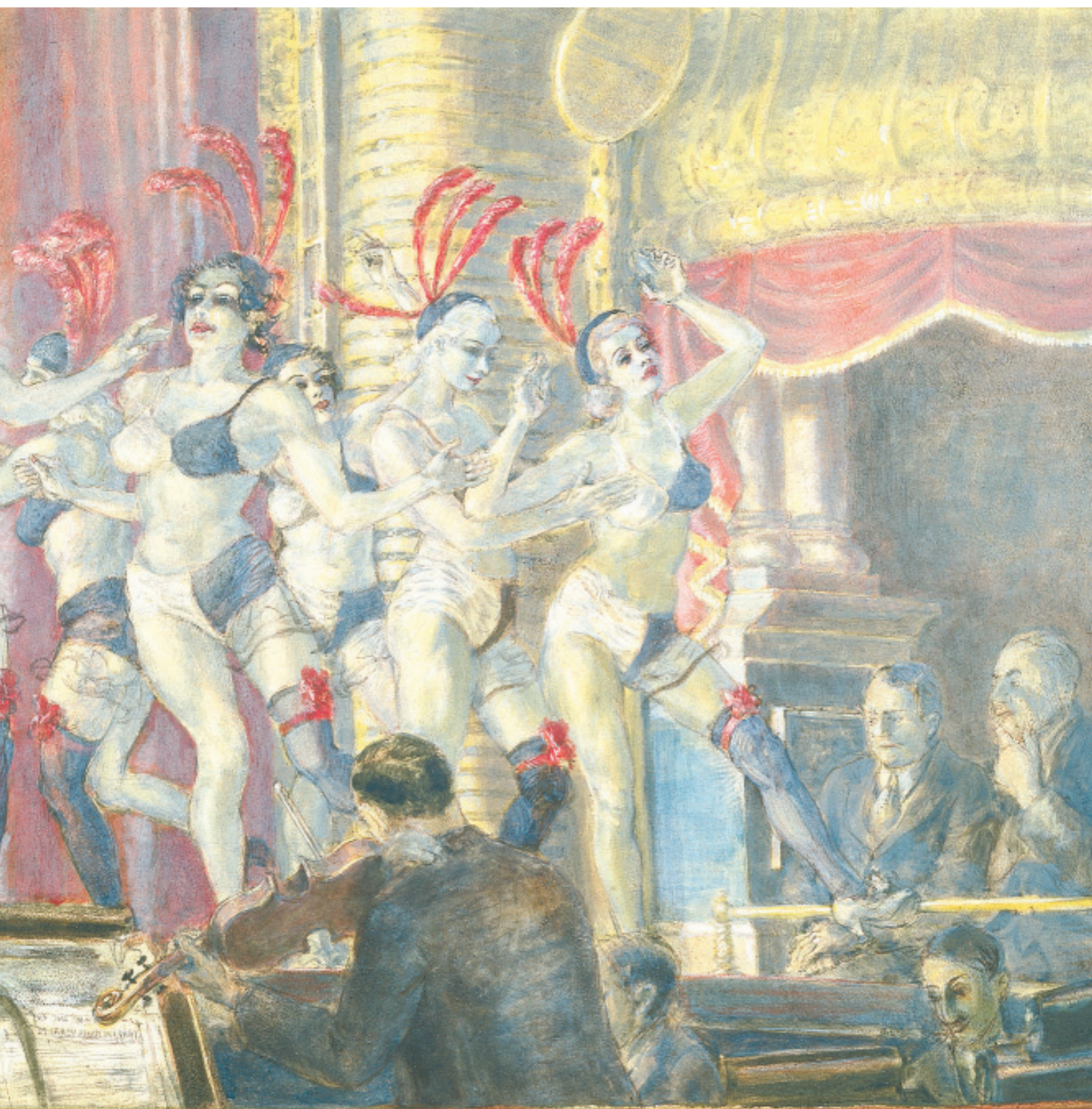
1 Alberto Vargas, *Untitled (Girl in Black Shorts)*. Calendar pinup published in *Esquire*, September 1946. Watercolor airbrush drawing. Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Gift of Esquire Inc. © Hearst Magazines, New York

2 Reginald Marsh, *Minsky's Chorus*, 1935. Tempera on composition board, 38 x 44 in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Partial and promised gift of Mr. and Mrs. Albert Hackett in honor of Edith and Lloyd Goodrich © Estate of Reginald Marsh/Art Students League/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

A comparison of Marsh's work with a typical Alberto Vargas pinup (fig. 1) shows how Marsh captured a grotesqueness of sex and humor that was absent from many mainstream images of sexually available women in this era. Whereas Marsh often represents his women as dirty, vulgar, and exuding a heated sexuality, Vargas's pinups are smooth, sleek, and impenetrable. For all the suggestiveness of her clinging clothes and long nails, Vargas's calendar girl has a relatively clean, acceptable allure. Her buttoned-up shirt, polka-dot tie, coiffed hair, and coy smile give her a girl-next-door flavor. The tightness of her clothes highlights the perfection of her physique, showing only the slick outline of her "classical" form. There are no flaws. Unsightly details are nonexistent—airbrushed out. Unlike the hardened, emotionally removed look of so many of Marsh's dancers (fig. 2), this pinup's coquettish expression signals a welcoming flirtation rather than the overt display required for employment. Also missing from the pinup image is the viewer, the visual consumer. For Marsh, the audience member and his lascivious desire or blasé contemplation are central to a grotesque atmosphere of commercialized sexual exchange. Desire is shown and marked as crude or comic, whereas pinup imagery denies the viewer's role and deflects critique.

Goodrich aptly noted that "Marsh's work was never devoid of humor, but it was a mordant humor, a relish for the grotesque."⁷ Because of this, Marsh's brand of humor might also be described as carnivalesque. It occurs in places that threaten social order. It coincides with, rather than cancels out, reactions of disgust and desire. Marsh's loose structure and gaudy color could signal liveliness, freedom, and vitality as well. But the humorous element, often indirect and subtle, reveals the seedy reality or irony of whatever is taking place in the image, signaling at the same time a celebration





in and critique of the subject matter. While the actual Coney Island sideshow or burlesque performance may have seemed to be innocent and harmless, it often becomes darker and more surreal in Marsh's view. The ambiguity in Marsh's art largely stems from the type of humor he chose to depict.

Formal Devices

The burlesque images exemplify Marsh's use of humor not as an end in itself, but as one ingredient of many that contribute to an overall bawdy tone appropriate to his settings. *Irving Place Burlesk* (see frontispiece) depicts a theater near the artist's Union Square studio that was best known to neighborhood low-lives and burlesque aficionados, not to mixed-gender and tourist crowds. Here the audience laughter

coexists with sexual display, and a cluttered composition is packed with undifferentiated detail, signaling either the humorous release of leisure or a messy, threatening irregularity. As in all of his burlesque scenes, Marsh did not indicate the comic in the most obvious manner, by showing the male comedians and their skits. Instead he focused on the female body as the comic object, confirming his intent to represent not just comedy but the sex-humor combination. It is unclear whether the onlookers are grinning from titillation or because they find something funny.

In images such as *Minsky's Chorus* (fig. 2) in which the audience is compositionally marginal, Marsh relies on other formal and iconographic devices to provide a tone of lewd hilarity. The artist uncharacteristically devotes nearly the entire canvas to the female performers, showing eight

- 3 Reginald Marsh, *Gaiety Burlesque*, 1929. Etching, 7 x 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. William Benton Museum of Art, University of Connecticut, Storrs, Gift of Helen Benton Boley © Estate of Reginald Marsh/Art Students League/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



- 4 Reginald Marsh, *Burlesk Runway*, 1927. Etching, 5 x 6 ¾ in. William Benton Museum of Art, University of Connecticut, Storrs, Gift of Helen Benton Boley © Estate of Reginald Marsh/Art Students League/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



chorines in the midst of their dance routine. Unlike the graceful, streamlined poses of Vargas girls, the movements of the voluptuous dancers in this image are awkward, uncoordinated, and out of synch. The figure at the right waves her hands in the air and kicks up one leg as a dancer in the background seems to run in the opposite direction; yet another faces the viewer with arms extending out from the waist and both feet on the ground. In conjunction with their heavy makeup and gaudy costumes, their dance appears ridiculous, even silly, when frozen in paint. The loud red, bright blue, and harsh yellow-gold give the image a heated, circuslike quality. The careful rendering of the architecture flattens and crowds the image, adding to the sense of chaos. These elements—garish colors, excessive detail, limited space, awkward poses, and ludicrous costuming—appear repeatedly in Marsh's burlesque scenes, as if they were a formula for communicating the flavor of these shows. In some cases, such as *Variety*

Follies (1951, private collection), the artist adds incongruous body types, pairing tall, thin women with short, stocky ones. And the formulaic qualities of his depictions often vary by medium. In his paintings, the sketchlike brushstrokes appear to be hovering, quivering lines independent of form, intensifying the already present sense of disordered abundance. In his etchings, this sense is achieved through a hyperattentive rendering of background specifics, resulting in an overwhelming plethora of marks. In the etching *Gaiety Burlesque* (fig. 3), the fecund architectural detail of the theater is so faithfully rendered that it seems to take on a life of its own.⁸

Everything is alive with movement and vivacity in Marsh's works, yet it is a motion that in some cases seems frenetic and out of control. A lack of order may signal fun and release, yet this freedom from structure has an ominous tone. Often, as in *Minsky's Chorus* and *Burlesk Runway* (fig. 4), Marsh further hinted at this by showing the chorines lit from



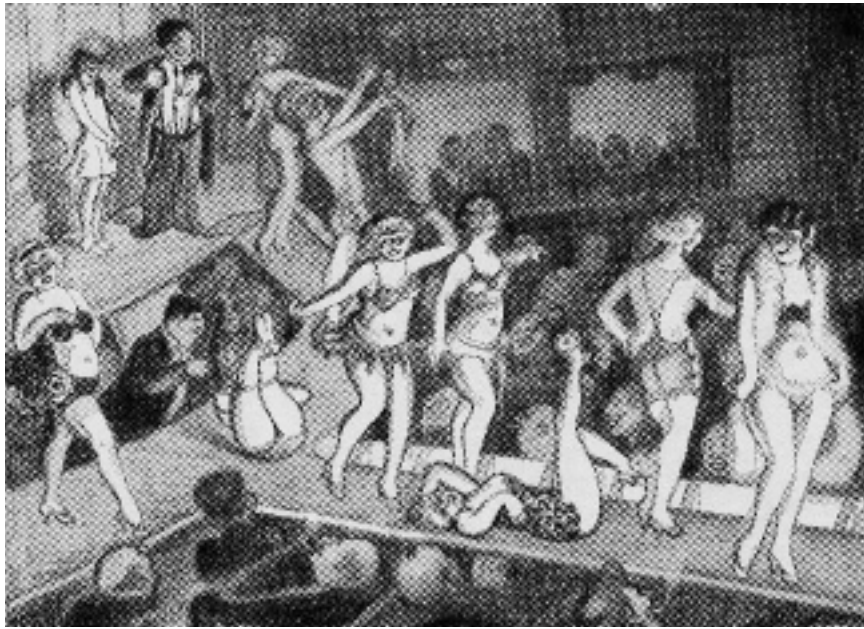
- 5 Reginald Marsh, *Down at Jim Kelly's*, 1936. Tempera on fiberboard, 36 x 30 1/2 in. Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia, Gift of Walter P. Chrysler Jr. © Estate of Reginald Marsh/Art Students League/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

- 6 Walt Kuhn, *Plumes*, 1931. Oil, 40 x 30 in. Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

beneath, giving them an otherworldly look reminiscent of Edgar Degas's dancers or Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's singers. In addition, the women who are baring their flesh usually are not participating in the excitement of their male observers. As in *Minsky's Chorus* or *Down at Jim Kelly's* (fig. 5), the performers have masklike expressions, suggesting the real cost of bringing "entertainment" to their customers. Popular culture exposés on burlesque theaters frequently told of a performer's transformation from green farm girl into tough cookie as a defense against daily exposure to leering audiences. Marsh may have borrowed from these sources the notion that dancers

were desensitized or hardened by their profession. He also may have been influenced by fellow artists such as Walt Kuhn, who made a career out of portraying sullen, disillusioned showgirls (fig. 6).

While other artists included sex, comedy, or the grotesque in their depictions of burlesque performances, Marsh's combination of these three elements makes his versions unique. Mabel Dwight imbued her roly-poly dancers with such a good-natured humor that they appear to be enjoying the moment as much as the audience (fig. 7). Yet Dwight's strippers have a curious lack of sexual energy and, despite their raucous frolicking, little about this scene can be deemed grotesque. Adolf Dehn's chorines in *Big-Hearted Girls* are harsh and monstrously machinelike, but devoid of humor and allure (fig. 8). As he said of this lithograph, "I tried to make the garish setting, the vulgar attempt to stimulate the audience, and the awkward pattern of the dancers a part of the design." The dancers' forms are so subservient to Dehn's angular, abstract patterning that they seem eerily disembodied, with none



7 Mabel Dwight, *On the Runway*. Illustration accompanying an article by Kenneth Macgowan in the August 1929 issue of *Vanity Fair*

8 Adolf Dehn, *Big-Hearted Girls (or The Last Veil)*, 1941. Lithograph, 13 ½ x 18 in. Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul

of the earthiness of Marsh's figures. Vulgarity alone remains in Dehn's print, suggesting an explicitly critical stance on the subject that is rare in Marsh's works.⁹

Marsh's carnivalesque, dark humor and its pronounced relation to sex and the grotesque are not confined to his burlesque scenes. This is an overarching theme of his oeuvre, which appears in many other works, especially those of

Coney Island, another site associated with the lower classes. In *Airhole at Coney Island* (fig. 9), a clown pushes a woman over an air jet that blows her skirt upward, part of the unexpected "fun" experienced by visitors at amusement parks. Rendered off balance and frantically trying to hold down her skirt, the woman's face reveals embarrassment, fright, and surprise. Yet a man wearing a hat at left peeks around the crowd to view her thighs and enjoy a laugh at her expense. The exposure of the female body is cause for a moment of hilarity within an atmosphere of the comic grotesque: the eerie midget clown grabs at her, people crowd her from behind, and the entire image is bathed in a surreal, orange glow. In *Pip and Flip* (fig. 10), a poster of a large smiling clown face placed in a context of supposed amusement seems more sinister than comic. It looms above the bare-legged women in the crowd and to the right of a poster advertising the deformed yet voluptuous pinhead twins from Peru. In *Tunnels of Love* (1931, private collection), the artist pairs three busty female performers with statues of bulging-eyed, monstrous creatures beneath a banner that reads "Very Funny Tunnels of Love." By including this dangerous side simmering beneath his brightly colored, boisterous surfaces, Marsh points to the element that humor attempts to mask but never fully covers up—fear.

Contemporary critics saw his art as threatening or unpleasant on the one hand, and lively and invigorating on the other. They often described his works with adjectives that suggested the ever-changing status of the grotesque body, using terms such as "swarming," "seamy," "sumptuous and sexy," "teeming," "swirling," and "tumultuous." The critics deemed Marsh's burlesque images in particular to be "things of strange allure" and "grossly satirical pictures of unbuttoned sensuality," recalling a body that is both appealing and repulsive, out of control, out of its confines. They considered his

- 9 Reginald Marsh, *Airhole at Coney Island*, 1938. Tempera, 24 x 30 in. Collection of Philip Dade © Estate of Reginald Marsh/Art Students League/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



strippers and chorus girls improper spectacles who “confront the public with their gaudy vitality.” One wrote that Marsh’s canvases possess a “conflict between attraction and revulsion”; another called them “packed atoms of terrific enjoyment.”¹⁰

Appropriately, when these critics commented directly on Marsh’s humor, they saw it either as adding to the overall liveliness and energy of his images or as mediating his depiction of an otherwise unseemly subject. The conflation of humor and zest was echoed in Marsh criticism throughout his career, from Henry McBride’s 1922 observation that the artist “has a genuine sense of humor and any amount of what has come to be known as ‘pep’” to a 1954 *Life* article that highlighted sketches showing “the humor and vitality that go on living in Marsh’s art.” But Margaret Breuning’s comment was perhaps the most telling. Marsh, she said, “saves” his dancers “from mere vulgarity by touching them with his healthy, robust humor.”¹¹

Masking the Threat

The idea of Marsh “saving” his distasteful subject matter with “robust humor” suggests that one function of his humor was to hold in abeyance or mask a potential threat, whether that be the staging of desire or the coarse tone of the lower-class environs in which this display took place. This joining of sex and humor functioned similarly in a number of popular sources. In their study of *Playboy* cartoons, for example, researchers Gail Dines-Levy and Gregory Smith found that the comedic caricature of women is a tool for social control. Over a ten-year period, 75 percent of the women appearing in *Playboy* cartoons were drawn with exaggerated sexual parts, as in Marsh’s images, whereas the majority of men (94 percent) were depicted realistically. The caricatured body type was a name tag for the “sexually available woman.” Dines-Levy and Smith argue that this kind of physical distortion



10 Reginald Marsh, *Pip and Flip*, 1932. Tempera on paper mounted on canvas, 48 ¼ x 48 ¼ in. Terra Foundation for the Arts, Daniel J. Terra Collection © Estate of Reginald Marsh/Art Students League/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

reduces the disturbing complexities of a social group into a stereotype that can become the target of ridicule and ultimately can be used to justify and maintain the power structure. Popular erotica of the 1930s and 1940s also employed caricature, likely to serve the same

function. A 1933 Minsky's program pictures a semi-nude dancer with enlarged breasts and buttocks next to a clown. Similarly, an advertisement for a pocket-size book of jokes that ran in the back of girlie magazines during the 1940s shows a smiling and voluptuous woman as its

only visual (fig. 11). Marsh's contemporary Walt Kuhn also combined the comic and sexual by regularly caricaturing the female form in his sketchbooks (fig. 12).¹²

In the burlesque show, this connection was more complex and troubling, and more blatantly tied to methods of control. One of the most widespread forms of entertainment for adults during the era, burlesque was usually marketed to a male audience. It is not surprising that Marsh adopted it as his subject matter, for it was a readymade combination of his favorite themes. Burlesque was indeed seen as something of a threat to the status quo, subject matter that would have to be "saved" or mediated by humorous treatment. Situated in seamy neighborhoods, the theaters were renowned for their raw character and the perpetuation of bad taste. Burlesque was considered the lowest rung on the ladder of live entertainment, thought to house showgirls and entertainers too old or untalented for the more esteemed realms of vaudeville, film, and serious theater. Since its introduction to America in the mid-nineteenth century, burlesque had been pitted against official culture and sanctioned codes of behavior. In the late 1930s, widely publicized closings of theaters by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia solidified the idea that burlesque embodied decay and degeneration, undercutting accepted moral standards.¹³

By exhibiting their bodies for a paying audience, the strippers and chorines seemed both the essence and the aberration of womanhood. They appeared to promise a revelation of the mysterious female body and feminine desire, yet they were often unmarried working women, situated outside the protected domestic sphere. Known for indelicate behavior that flew in the face of feminine convention, they were frequently depicted in films, novels, and newspapers as sassy, scheming, and tough. According to this understanding, these women always spoke in slang, dated gangsters, and had a penchant for promiscuity, heavy drinking, gambling,



and even fistfights. Authors of popular and scholarly publications debated the makeup of burlesque audiences—whether bums, college students, or slumming uptowners—but agreed that the dancers were all lower class, one step above prostitutes.¹⁴

The performances consisted of three main components: comedy skits, chorus numbers, and strip acts. The chorus and strip numbers differed in that the former included more than one woman and usually showed less skin, but both focused on exhibiting the female form. Burlesque manager Morton Minsky admitted that he included these portions of the show "as much for the comedy as for the titillation," and it was not unusual for songs accompanying strip segments to be full of spicy and humorous double entendres.¹⁵ Contemporary films about burlesque such as *Dancing Lady* (1933) or the *Lady of Burlesque* (1943) reenacted strip sequences that contained comedic references to sex and, like Marsh's art, showed the audience's reaction shifting between lustful gazes and outright laughter. The burlesque show thus served as a microcosm of the culture's ambivalence toward the female body. The alternation between strip and chorus numbers with comedic skits made certain that the fear and discomfort caused by these brusque, unconventional women were immediately discounted by laughter.

The comedy skits had featured some subversive elements in the nineteenth century, with women often playing the role of comedian, for example. But by the time Marsh was painting the skits had become largely oppressive, with women depicted as the mute objects of jokes made by male



11 Advertisement for “New Pocket Size Comic Booklets,” *Titter* magazine, October 1949, 51. Collection of Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction, Bloomington, Indiana

12 Walt Kuhn, *Nude*, 1929. Watercolor, 3 3/4 x 3 3/4 in. With permission of DC Moore Gallery, New York

comedians. Humor had become a way to ease the threat women presented. Most depictions of women in these burlesque skits followed classic stereotypes: the badgering mother-in-law; the homely, nagging, ball-and-chain wife; or, like Marsh’s women, the young, dumb bombshell. Skits included punch lines such as “Who looks them in the face?” and a multitude of “She’s so dumb . . .” and “She’s so fat . . .” jokes. Others included “comic” mix-ups in which women were, for example, confused with barnyard animals. Rarely did the women talk back or have the power to represent themselves. In contrast to any sense of agency they may have demonstrated in their strip numbers, here they often merely appeared on stage to serve as a visual reference for the joke at hand, supposedly oblivious to the comics’ comments.¹⁶

As in Marsh’s paintings as well as popular visual culture, the exaggeration of and emphasis on body parts denoted the

comic in burlesque shows. The sexualized points of difference—breasts, buttocks, vagina—drew the most ambivalent feelings and served as the basis for most jokes, for they were the signifiers of a threatening “other.” One common sketch consisted of a male comic waving a pickled herring under the nose of another, supposedly sleeping, who mumbles, “Not tonight, honey, not tonight”—or in another version, “Ye gods, you need a douche!” Then there was the infamous act of Carrie Finnel, a middle-aged, overweight “mammary manipulator” who moved her ample breasts to musical accompaniment, arousing in her audience a complicated mix of laughter, disgust, and desire.¹⁷

Even more disturbing, however, was the frequent use of violence in these comic sketches. Comedians acted out rapes, beatings, and even killings of women on stage, all apparently meant to be funny. Here a man might kill a woman for reading titles aloud in a movie theater, or for not serving beans with his already hearty dinner. Girlie magazines showed this potent linking of violence, comedy, and the female form as well, often including photographs of men slapping or punching women or, as in an image from an exposé on burlesque in *Titter* magazine, gearing up to hit an unaware chorine with a phallic bat (fig. 13). David Dressler’s 1933 sociological study on burlesque, later published as a series of articles in the *New York Post*, confirms that this violence was a known aspect of burlesque’s larger reputation. As he wrote, “The entire performance tends to grant release of the emotions. . . . Here a man may be as wicked, as harsh, as sexual, as ethnocentric as he wishes. The barriers are down and he is in congenial company. . . . Here is release, indeed.”¹⁸

The suggestion here is not that Marsh intended his paintings to be read as burlesque skits, or that he consciously condoned these obvious displays of violence. But this perception of burlesque as a place of liberation from social codes and rules,



13 "What You Don't See at the Burlesque," *Titter* magazine, October 1949, 30. Collection of Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction, Bloomington, Indiana

where, under the guise of humor, one could do or say things that were normally unacceptable, certainly factored into Marsh's choice of subject matter and his patrons' decision to buy his art. Whether or not his viewers and buyers had ever been to a burlesque show, they knew it was an exotic though tawdry place where the rules of conduct found in the upper-class world and work environment were hardly heeded, a place where one could consume the lower-class female body without consequences.

Male Bonding

The artist's correspondence with his most faithful patron, William Benton, confirms that Marsh's linking of sex and humor signaled release for middle- to upper-class male viewers. While there is some evidence that the artist used humor to mediate a threat, Benton's letters highlight how Marsh's works embodied for some viewers pure leisure and escape. Benton eventually collected about one-third of the artist's oeuvre, stating several times in letters to Marsh that the act of buying the pictures was his "only extravagance" and gave him "more pleasure than anything else."¹⁹

Benton and Marsh first knew each other in college during the early 1920s, when they worked together on the *Yale Record*, a student monthly devoted to humor. After college, Benton began his own advertising company, then worked in high-ranking administrative positions for the University of Chicago and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. In 1945 he became the assistant secretary of state, and he later served as a senator from Connecticut and ambassador for UNESCO. He started collecting Marsh's art in 1934, when the two men renewed their college friendship, and in some cases acted as an informal dealer for the artist, encouraging friends and colleagues to buy his work.

From their beginning as students at the *Record* to their later correspondence as married professionals, Marsh and Benton's relationship involved what Benton termed "college humor"—basically jokes about sex and women, similar to the comic strain found in girlie magazines, only tamer. The consumption of desirable femininity in a jocular context not only added to their sense of solidarity as men and as friends, but it also affirmed their masculinity and sexual prowess in their later middle age, when most of their correspondence took place. As Marsh once wrote to Benton regarding his own weight gain, "I am on the wagon and swimming a lot—so many pictures (and

privately is a subject worthy of any picture you ever painted” and, in a different letter, referred to his young receptionist as a “most attractive girl, a very attractive girl.” At another time, Benton asked the artist, “Do you remember when that candid camera man was around shooting pictures of us? . . . Whom did you have your eye on in that picture . . . ? One of the girls in my office must have looked pretty good.” He further confided to Marsh that a female executive at the Art Institute of Chicago “seems to be all hot and bothered and in a fine feminine sweat over her talk with you.”²⁰

Benton discussed the women in Marsh's artwork in the same jovial men's-club tone. In many cases, he wrote about them as if they were real, so that at times his "appreciation" of the female subjects in the paintings and of the actual women passing by his office or on the streets seems indistinguishable. Both were accessed and understood visually and voyeuristically. In contemplating a purchase, for example, Benton spoke of acquiring a "girl" rather than a painting. In a 1941 letter he stated, "That girl you were doing—you remember that I want her unless you're keeping her for an exhibit or have other plans for her. It just occurred to me . . . you may have forgotten that I was ogling that girl." In other comments, he fantasized about making advances toward the women in Marsh's paintings: "I have seen the days when I wouldn't mind chasing after the young lady, trying to match [her] stride for stride."²¹

Time and again, Benton cited the “liveliness” of Marsh’s pictures as their most appealing quality. As he stated in a biography of Marsh written in the early 1950s, “I like Marsh’s paintings for the same reason that I like Marsh. I like their lustiness, vitality, their marvelous craftsmanship, their love of life, their verve and zest.” Benton frequently stated that the high energy of Marsh’s art got him through his workdays. In a letter from

REGINALD MARSH
1 UNION SQUARE
NEW YORK & N. Y.

If you could let me know if
Mr Lanning could drop in on you - when
& where - he's in New York now
do let me know

I am on the wagon & swimming
in lot - so many pictures are
pouring forth - ~~my~~ The keynote,
Hope to see you soon

Ever yours
Reg.

CONEY ISLAND
NO DOGS
NO GAMES
NO NECKING
NO PICNICING
NO NO NO
NO NO NO
NO NO NO
NO NO NO
-NO
-NO

DOGS
PARKING

I am hearing 50'



15 Reginald Marsh, *George C. Tilyou's Steeplechase Park*, 1936. Tempera, 36 x 48 in. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Gift of the Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation © Estate of Reginald Marsh/Art Students League/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

1945, he asked Marsh to paint him images that are “big and lush and bright to fill up these blank spots on my office walls. The atmosphere of the State Department requires the offset of Reg Marsh’s paintings. After I’ve walked down that long dark gloomy hall, I need such paintings to look at in order to put the life back into me.” While Benton credited the artworks’ bright color and “wit” here

for lifting his spirits, he more frequently cited “the girls” as the direct cause for this effect. “That’s a chipper looking girl walking across the wall of my office. . . . She cheers me up. . . . All of your pictures do.” And again, “I am crazy about my barelegged girl. . . . She’s just what Washington needs.” Reminiscing with Lloyd Goodrich in 1955, the collector wrote, “I used to look at the girls [in

Marsh's paintings] to help me overlook some of the dull conversation to which I was exposed."²²

In all of these remarks, Benton directly opposes the "lustiness" of Marsh's art to the drudgery of his own drab work environment, the government, and Washington—places bound by regulations, seriousness, and structure. For this upper-class executive, Marsh's carnivalesque combination of indecorous humor and sexuality was emblematic of freedom, recreation, and vitality. Like the "fillies and fun" banners above burlesque theaters, Marsh linked the suggestive female body and humor as the formula for a safe diversion from everyday life. In Benton's view, humor rendered any risks innocuous and readily digestible.

It seems appropriate to revisit Marsh's form and iconography in the context of these letters. Independent of subject matter, his works summon up the idea of release through their chaotic compositions and inclusion of bodies and things that seem to flow beyond their borders, figures that spill over the edge of the canvas, and randomly placed lines and colors that appear independent of form, floating on the picture's surface. As titles such as *Let's Be a Child Again* (1944, private collection) suggest, Marsh's works are specifically about a lack of control—about the freedom from structure and daily life that people sought at Coney Island or the burlesque show. Like the roller-coaster rides and fun houses, the experiences Marsh captured are both funny and scary precisely because they offer moments of "letting go." This context gives us a better understanding of Marsh's frequent depiction of groups of women on amusement park rides that make them lose their balance. The portrayal of women falling all over each other, losing control of their limbs and of their ability to keep their fulsome bodies covered, as in *The Bowl* (1933, Brooklyn Museum of Art) and *George C. Tilyou's Steeplechase Park* (fig. 15), was not mere erotica. It was a perfect way

to embody the entire sphere of fun and leisure, especially for Marsh's male patrons.

In some ways Marsh's works and Benton's letters document a type of thinking that in 1953, a year in which Marsh was still actively making art, would culminate in the advent of *Playboy* magazine. The *Playboy* philosophy capitalized on this sex-humor link as a sign of release from work and other structured institutions such as marriage. In Hugh Hefner's words at its founding, "*Playboy* is dedicated to the enjoyment of the good life, instead of settling for job security, conformity, togetherness . . . and slow death." Consumption of desirable femininity was at the center of this carefree "good life." *Playboy* cartoons confirm this philosophy, portraying a world of male sexual pleasure largely uncomplicated by jobs and family demands, emotional ties, and biological realities. This notion of fantasy also appeared in the comedic skits of burlesque, in which pills and love potions made a woman desire the next person she met, and in which reading aloud a magic line in a book produced a beautiful woman out of thin air. This make-believe quality was part of the draw of the burlesque show, according to contemporary accounts; as Dressler noted in 1933, "it causes one to forget the drab and the drudging. One forgets that wives are old and other women hard to get. Here is a gay world where every girl wants to go to bed and every man may say just what is on his mind."²³

The rise of *Playboy* confirmed that the connection of female sexuality with humor was a widespread phenomenon essential to many heterosexual men's experience of leisure, not just Benton's. There are no direct references in Marsh's or Benton's papers to marital unhappiness or evidence that they harbored any real intentions to live the life of a playboy. Rather, the letters document an imaginary or temporary escape into what came to be known as the *Playboy* philosophy. The viewing, buying, and discussion of

Marsh's paintings aided this fantasy, much as the magazine functioned for its readers and burlesque for its audiences.

One wonders, too, if their waggish exchanges served to alleviate any guilt these men might have felt over their extramarital carnal urges toward lower-class women. Ideas regarding sexuality had changed drastically during the course of Marsh and Benton's lifetime. Both were born about 1900, in an era that often viewed male desire as bestial and in need of strict control. It was not until late in their lives that a man's expression of sexual yearnings was largely accepted and embraced as a natural part of masculinity. For most of the first half of the twentieth century, men received mixed messages about expressing their urges, and when these feelings crossed marital lines or were directed toward an impure subject, such as a working-class burlesque queen, any sense of guilt a man may have had was compounded. In James T. Farrell's 1930s trilogy *Studs Lonigan*, the young protagonist is filled with self-loathing after visiting a burlesque theater, especially when he compares the performers with his sweetheart, Catherine. "He was so disgusted with himself that he could almost vomit. . . . Watching such lowdown broads, letting them send him off. . . . How different Catherine was from them. She was decent . . . clean, where they were so dirty." Similarly, Roger, the young upper-class protagonist of Russell Higgins's 1935 novel *Burlesque Queen*, feels self-disgust at his seduction by a lowly stripper. He "felt himself an unfortunate, leering beast . . . [and] had come home ashamed and trembling, reviling himself bitterly." The family priest scolds him for falling for a woman "whose common notoriety and behavior are a jest upon everybody's lips." Though fictional, these passages point to the ambivalence many men felt toward the performers and toward their own desire. Marsh's visual enactment of sexual temptations in a humorous context may have helped male

viewers reconsider feelings of guilt stemming from their upbringing in the light of more modern thinking that marked such urges as an essential part of manhood.²⁴

In addition, Benton's letters show that the "college humor" he shared with Marsh aided their bonding and communication as two heterosexual men. As in burlesque shows, where men collectively confirmed their mutual object of desire and then shared the experience of joking about it, Benton's comments and Marsh's images served to fortify a masculine identity and a separate male culture. The men's-club atmosphere that existed between burlesque patrons and comedians, and between Benton and Marsh, appeared in contemporary girlie magazines as well. There captions such as "Oh, Honey, we love those legs!" and "Things are getting warmer all the time, eh, guys?" are written in a male voice and addressed to a male reader about the female body presented on the page. Evidence of this male bonding also exists in Marsh's art, as seen in the occasional audience member who turns to the man seated next to him to share his comments on (*New Gotham Burlesque*, 1932, New York Public Library) or laughter at (see frontispiece) the nude woman on stage. In some, such as the painted version of a different *Irving Place Burlesque* (1930–33, Hunter Museum of American Art, Chattanooga, Tennessee), audience members even turn their gaze and lustful grins to the assumed male viewer, as if looking to find their desire shared and affirmed. In the process, the viewer's arousal is normalized and marked as guilt-free. Particularly interesting in this context of male bonding is Marsh's decision to place portraits of friends in at least one painting. Although Benton did not specify which figure is which, he wrote that the audience of *Strip Tease in New Jersey* (fig. 16) included depictions of several well-known figures: himself; Lloyd Goodrich, the art historian, biographer, and childhood friend of Marsh; Kenneth Hayes



- 16 Reginald Marsh, *Strip Tease in New Jersey*, 1945. Tempera, 36 x 48 in. Unlocated. From Lloyd Goodrich, *Reginald Marsh* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1972), 228 © Estate of Reginald Marsh/Art Students League/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

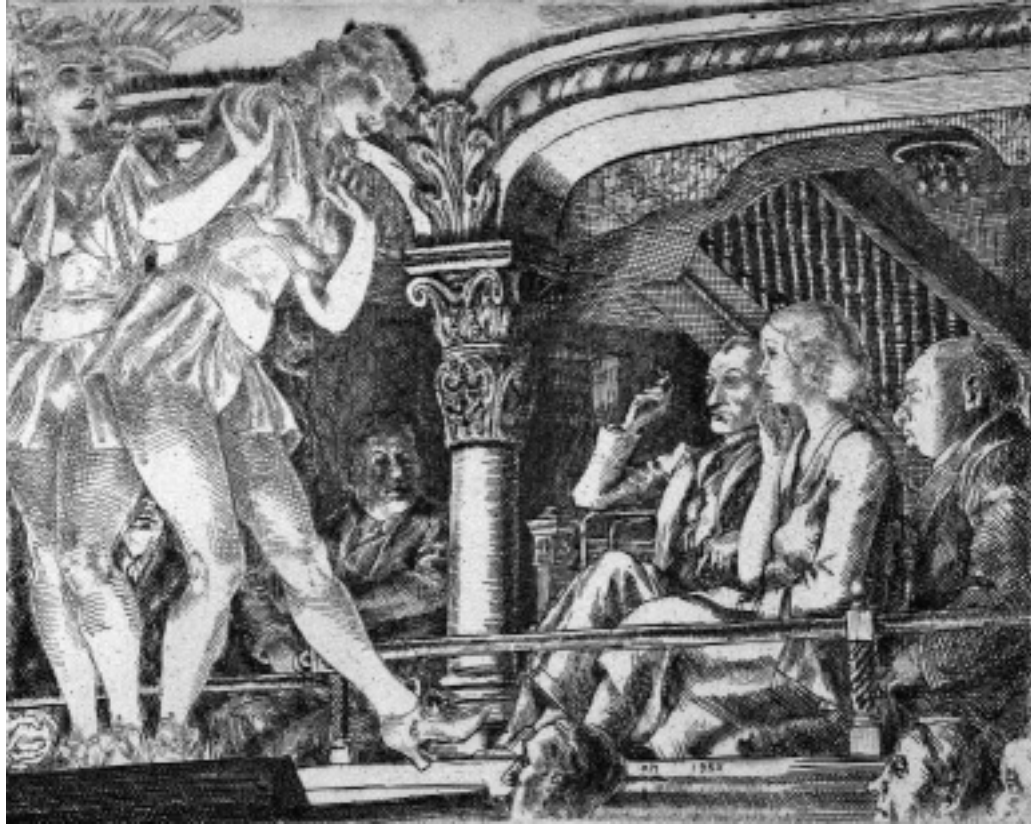
Miller, an artist and mentor of Marsh; and publishers William Randolph Hearst and Henry Luce. This bonding between men over the consumption of female sexuality in a humorous context was not just something that Marsh objectively recorded as part of the atmosphere of burlesque, but something he and Benton experienced firsthand.²⁵

Class Differences

Marsh's inclusion of his well-off patrons and friends in an atmosphere renowned for its tawdry, downtown character also raises issues of class. The lower-class

status of Marsh's female performers contributed to the interpretation of his artworks as representations of an invigorating and authentic world of leisure and fun. Marsh and his buyers saw the lower classes and their environs in much the same way as the Ashcan artists of the previous generation: as uninhibited and carefree, as the antithesis of the structure and blandness of the bourgeois, white-collar world. "People of wealth spend money to disguise themselves, but these people live in the open . . . reality is exposed and not disguised," Marsh once commented. Slumming was popular in the first half of the twentieth century, when the middle and upper classes

- 17 Reginald Marsh, *Gaiety Burlesque*, 1932. Etching, 7 7/8 x 9 7/8 in. William Benton Museum of Art, University of Connecticut, Storrs, Gift of Helen Benton Boley © Estate of Reginald Marsh/Art Students League/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



looked to ethnically diverse and lower-class areas such as Greenwich Village or Harlem as sources of entertainment and invigoration. Excursions to burlesque shows became part of this general vogue. While burlesque audiences were still reputed to consist of derelicts and sex addicts, this slumming trend was recorded in popular articles and film. In *Dancing Lady* (MGM, 1933), for example, the opening scene shows well-dressed uptowners standing in line for tickets next to a disheveled drunk who begs for entry to the show. A few scenes later, two chorines (one played by a young Joan Crawford) performing an uncoordinated dance exchange some telling lines in their Jersey accents about a well-dressed man in the front row: “Hey, Jeannie, get a load of Park Ave.” “Yeah, doing the slum thing.”²⁶

Several of Marsh’s images document the slumming trend as well. In etchings such as *Gaiety Burlesque* (fig. 17), he

highlights members of the audience who are well-dressed, coiffed, and poised. The obvious discomfort of the woman in the front row, with her closed and guarded body language, confirms that she was not a regular. Marsh rarely showed women in his burlesque audiences, and when he did he disclosed their extreme unease, indicating that the sort of establishments he represented usually drew “men only.”

Marsh’s inclusion of identifiable well-to-do figures such as Benton, Hearst, and Luce in *Strip Tease in New Jersey* is perhaps more telling of the role his artworks played. As always, the artist did not represent the conspicuously advertised Broadway burlesque that catered to middle-class tourists, but an out-of-the-way theater frequented by cigar-smoking connoisseurs and neighborhood bums, where the “authentic” burlesque experience was available only to those “in the know.” Via his marginal status as artist, Marsh and his painting served as liaisons

for his patron and viewers. Whether Benton and the others actually attended burlesque with Marsh is unknown. Either way, by including individualized portraits of these men, Marsh placed them in this seemingly more immediate world where inhibitions are abandoned. They could reap the benefits of rejuvenation and consume the low female “other” without guilt, without worrying about their reputations or the unpleasantness of associating with the seedy set thought to frequent real burlesque houses. That Marsh’s paintings functioned as a vicarious form of slumming for his viewers was not lost on critics. As Henry McBride wrote in 1933, the artist’s pictures, “together with Mae West’s films, may again mass the limousines at vantage points along the Bowery where life may be observed in the raw.”²⁷

Yet in *Strip Tease in New Jersey*, Marsh paints some of these respectable men as if they were a habitual part of the marginal burlesque subculture. Like many of the other audience members, they display lustful gazes, lascivious grins, or stubborn frowns, so that they too are marked as grotesquely comic. Marsh treats them with the same sketchy, seemingly uncontrolled lines used for the performer, the same wash of brown and gold and pink that suggests carnal desire and dirt. As one critic complained, his figures look “as if a layer of soot had descended upon them.” But this is a painting; the “soot” is a fiction that can be washed away after the fantasy of desire and escape has been played out. The artist not only served as liaison but also performed a sort of instant class transvestism, a surface change for his viewers and buyers. His grotesque form and iconography served to mark the space as a liminal one in which such a temporary transformation could take place without causing any real, irreparable damage.²⁸

Finally, Marsh’s own position must be considered in deciphering the functions of his sex-humor combination. Despite

his upper-class social connections, Marsh avoided elite crowds and instead haunted the environs of his paintings—Coney Island, Union Square, subways, and burlesque theaters (fig. 18). The artist frequently voiced his preference for lower-class subjects, and consciously fashioned an identity that shunned the privileged world in which he was raised. As he told a reporter, “I do not like fancy food and women, but I do like moderate good food and girls.”²⁹ He dressed in unassuming street clothes, was said to have adopted a James Cagney-like, “dead-end kid” attitude, and spoke in colloquial slang, even during interviews he knew would be widely reproduced. In this light then, Marsh’s inclusion of risqué humor and overt sexuality in his images was another means of communicating the lower-class character of the scenes he depicted. As with his adoption of slang, it helped him to fashion an identity as an artist and as a man who was down-to-earth and unpretentious, with a relaxed, modern morality and a vital attitude toward life.

Marsh was never really an “insider,” however, in the popular pleasure districts he painted. Despite his rough-hewn media persona, he took pains to separate himself from mass culture so that his productions would be deemed original “high” art. After all, given the frequency of his attendance at burlesque shows, what was there to distinguish him from the socially deficient derelict who sat beside him in the theater? As an artist-anthropologist researching how “the other half” lives, Marsh may have reassured himself that the points of difference were a devotion to work, the higher pursuit of art, and its supposedly concomitant powers of lucid observation. Critics lauded Marsh for his “steady flow of productive energy.” Forever the fascinated but outside observer, he carried his sketchbook whenever he went to the lower-class locations he depicted, almost as if it were a shield. As his artist friend

- 18 Photograph of Reginald Marsh sketching at Coney Island. From Edward Laning, *The Sketchbooks of Reginald Marsh* (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 8



Adolf Dehn, a fellow burlesque habitué, once commented, Marsh obsessively sketched throughout shows. He did not lose himself in the “quivering enchanting feminine pulchritude” of the strip acts, but “with a will of steel forswore the sweet pleasures of the stage” and instead

concentrated on capturing the surrounding architectural detail. Unlike others in the audience who surrendered themselves to the lure of these women, their sex and spectacle (and what Marsh may have perceived as the slothful, mindless visual consumption by the masses), the artist

differentiated himself by always producing, always working.³⁰

Approaching his subjects with a “sardonic humor” and “tongue-in-cheek understanding” was another way for the artist to distance himself from his subjects and to create “real” high art. His art was not meant simply to replicate the burlesque theater and its acts but to recognize the show for what it actually was—mass culture on display. Whereas others may have come for the titillation or the entertainment, Marsh and his viewers were students of a dying form of Americana, self-consciously rejoicing and relishing in the very lowness of burlesque. The cheap imperfection of the performers, the poorly crafted stage sets, the awkward dance steps, the overtold jokes in poor taste, and even the rough or sleazy audience members—all added to the color and flavor of the event. Humor, not prudish and Victorian condemnation, was the modern, enlightened way to approach this form of entertainment. As *New York Times* critic Brooks Atkinson wrote in 1942, “The American sense of humor has handled the striptease more intelligently than the moralists.” Marsh’s humor critiqued the environs of burlesque as well as depicting them. Though constantly surrounded by the low culture of his subjects, he remained one step removed with the “gifted” eye of the well-educated artist, seeing the nuances, complexities—and humor—of these performances that went unnoticed by others.³¹

Photo credits

36 (right), Photo by Geoffrey Clements; 41 (top), Courtesy of *Vanity Fair* © 1928/1929 (renewed 1956/1957) Conde Nast Publications Inc.; 43, Photo courtesy of the Terra Foundation for the Arts; 47, Photo courtesy of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; 48, Photo by Lee Stalsworth; 54, Photo by Gene Pyle

Conclusion

Placed in this context, *Irving Place Burlesk* (see frontispiece) helps to clarify issues found throughout Marsh’s oeuvre, though often less overtly illustrated. By

not including a male comedian and showing the nearly nude dancer on stage as the only object of humor, Marsh highlighted the link between sex and humor that was essential to the grotesque character of burlesque. This pairing allowed him to capture the ambivalent reaction to the exposed lower-class female body, a response that alternated between desire, humor, and disgust. That Marsh focused so much of his composition on the audience indicates the centrality of this complex reaction in communicating the bawdy flavor he strove to convey. The outright laughter of certain members of the audience likely functioned in the same manner that all references to humor did in Marsh’s work: to designate the viewing of his art, like burlesque shows, as a method of escape and invigoration. It was a means of dealing with a subject matter and style that could just as easily be read as grotesque and threatening. For some viewers, it heightened and marked the marginality of these women and their world, but it also made this realm more accessible, alleviating the guilt associated with desire. For the artist, it served as a self-fashioning tool and helped communicate the authority of his artistic and critical vision. While only a case study, this examination suggests the vital ways in which the consumption of the sexualized female body and humor were endemic to the concept of leisure in America during the 1930s and 1940s. Together, the iconography of sex and humor signified the essential brand of fun that park goers sought on their trips to Coney Island, or that the businessman hoped for on his way to the burlesque house—a type of entertainment that came to differentiate the hours of play from those of work.

Notes

My warmest thanks to Sarah Burns and Elizabeth Lee for their insightful comments on preliminary versions of this article.

- 1 While most Marsh scholarship acknowledges the element of humor in the artist's works, it does not examine in depth its use and function. Nor have any publications focused specifically on his large body of burlesque images. The most helpful overall view of Marsh and his art remains Lloyd Goodrich, *Reginald Marsh* (New York: Abrams, 1972). For an excellent analysis of Marsh's shopping scenes in the context of contemporary notions of gender, see Ellen Todd, *The "New Woman" Revised: Painting and Gender Politics on Fourteenth Street* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993). See also Marilyn Cohen, *Reginald Marsh's New York: Paintings, Drawings, Prints and Photographs* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in conjunction with Dover, 1983); and Norman Sasowsky, *The Prints of Reginald Marsh* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1976). Two dissertations have dealt with Marsh's burlesque scenes: Michelle Miller, "The Charms of Exposed Flesh: Reginald Marsh and Burlesque" (PhD diss., Univ. of Pennsylvania, 1997); and Kathleen Spies, "Burlesque Queens and Circus Divas: Images of the Female Grotesque in the Art of Reginald Marsh and Walt Kuhn, 1915–1945" (PhD diss., Indiana Univ., 1999).
- 2 On Marsh as Hogarth, see, for example, Dorothy Seiberling, "Reginald Marsh: Swarming City Scenes by 'U.S. Hogarth' Go on a Year Long Tour of the Country," *Life*, February 1956, 80–86; and Stanley Hayter, "Hogarthian Marsh," *Art Digest*, February 1939, 25. Burlesque images by other artists are generally discussed within the context of each artist's oeuvre; one welcome exception is Vivien Green Fryd, "Edward Hopper's *Girlie Show*: Who Is the Silent Partner?" *American Art* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 53–75. Irving Zeidman, *The American Burlesque Show* (New York: Hawthorn Books Inc., 1967), 222.
- 3 Miller is quoted in Cohen, *Marsh's New York*, 24. Goodrich's quote is from his *Reginald Marsh*, 24. The artist's first marriage, to sculptor Betty Burroughs, lasted from 1923 to 1933; his second, to painter Felicia Meyer, lasted from 1934 to the end of his life. The use of "other" in this article is meant in the theoretical sense of "other than self," or everyone the subject is not. See Jacques Lacan, "The Subject and the Other: Alienation," in *Four Fundamental Concepts*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1978); and Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Knopf, 1952).
- 4 See Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984); Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1982); Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1986).
- 5 Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (1963; repr., New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1981), 27, 118; Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 67, 73, 90.
- 6 Marsh quoted in Douglas Gilbert, "Camera Craze Has Made American Artists Feel Inferior," *New York World-Telegram*, October 5, 1938, 3. Seiberling, "Reginald Marsh," 88. Russo, *Female Grotesque*, 18.
- 7 Lloyd Goodrich, "Tribute to Reginald Marsh," *Selections from the Felicia Meyer Marsh Bequest* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1979), 1.
- 8 Although not strictly scenes of burlesque theaters, some of Marsh's images of nightclubs and taxi-dance halls are even more explicit in showing the scantily clad female performer as the object of male laughter and desire. In the etching *Texas Guinan*, tuxedoed men standing beneath the famed nightclub owner, Guinan, bend over in laughter, apparently at the four showgirls before them, two boisterous and comic, the other two posed merely to display their bodies.
- 9 Dehn quoted in Joycelyn Lumsdaine and Thomas O'Sullivan, eds., *Adolf Dehn: A Catalogue Raisonné* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1987), 153. See also Fryd, "Edward Hopper's *Girlie Show*," for a comparison of Marsh's burlesque scenes with those of Benton and Hopper.
- 10 Quotes are from Seiberling, "Swarming City Scenes"; *Time*, December 7, 1948; "Striptease Pays Off," *Time*, March 12, 1945; *New York Sunday Post*, September 15, 1935; *Creative Art*, 1933; C. H. Bonte, *Philadelphia Enquirer*, January 8, 1950. All are clippings found in the Reginald Marsh Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, and Marsh vertical file, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.
- 11 All criticism is from the Marsh Papers and Marsh vertical file, as cited in note 10. Identified sources are, in order: Henry McBride, review in *New York Sun*, 1922; "An Artist's Last Sketches," *Life*, July 26, 1954; and Margaret Breuning, untitled 1934 newspaper clipping.
- 12 Gail Dines-Levy and Gregory W. H. Smith, "Representations of Women and Men in *Playboy* Sex Cartoons," in *Humor and Society: Resistance and Control*, ed. Chris Powell and George Paton (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 253. Minsky's program is from "Burlesque" vertical file, Kinsey Institute, Bloomington, Indiana. Another from 1933 with the same iconography is reproduced in Mort Minsky and Milt Machlin, *Minsky's Burlesque* (New York: Arbor House, 1986), 173.
- 13 Burlesque historians and purists usually consider the 1930s the beginning of the end of "true" burlesque and its decline into the striptease show. Yet this idea of burlesque being on its "last leg" and the increasing shoddiness of the shows furthered its reputation as something marginal. The numerous articles, films, plays, novels, and artworks produced about burlesque in the 1930s suggest that the theaters' decline heightened fascination with the entertainment form and its centrality in the cultural imagination. For a scholarly history of burlesque, see Robert Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1991). For popular histories, see Minsky and Machlin, *Minsky's*; and Zeidman, *Burlesque Show*. For contemporary studies, see David Dressler, "Burlesque as a Social Phenomenon" (PhD diss., New York Univ., 1933); and H. M. Alexander, *Strip Tease: The Vanished Art of Burlesque* (New York: Knight Publishers, 1938). Many of these generalizations are also based on archival clippings from the

- Kinsey Institute, the New York Public Library, and the New-York Historical Society.
- 14 For stereotypes of burlesque performers, see Dressler, "Burlesque," and Alexander, *Strip Tease*. Numerous films and popular novels on burlesque during the era also perpetuated these stereotypes, including Gypsy Rose Lee, *G-String Murder* (New York: Simon, 1935); Russell Higgins, *Burlesque Queen* (New York: Godwin, 1935); and *I'm No Angel* (MGM, 1933), starring Mae West.
 - 15 Minsky's quote primarily refers to burlesque from the 1920s and 1930s. Minsky and Machlin, *Minsky's*, 26.
 - 16 For more on burlesque comedy skits, see Jill Dolan, "'What, No Beans?' Images of Women and Sexuality in Burlesque Comedy," *Journal of Popular Culture* 18, no. 3 (Winter 1984): 38; Dressler, "Burlesque," 67–69; and Alexander, *Strip Tease*. For nineteenth-century burlesque's subversive elements, see Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*.
 - 17 Most of these sketches are from Dolan, "'What, No Beans?'" 40–44. On the fetishization of body parts in comic sketches and a detailed account of Finnel's performance, see Alexander, *Strip Tease*, 42–44.
 - 18 In another frequently played skit, a woman entices a man as he attempts to nap. Something under his robe begins to rise in the area of his genitals. His robe is pulled away, but rather than an erect penis it is a club that protrudes from between his legs. His punch line: "If she hadn't gone away and let me sleep, I'd have beat the hell out of her." Dolan, "'What, No Beans?'" 43. Also see Powell and Paton, eds., *Humour and Society*, for many examples of how humor masks aggression. A revised version of Dressler's dissertation was published as a series called "Science Looks at Burlesque" in the *New York Post* throughout July 1937. Dressler's quotes are from his "Burlesque," 81, 69.
 - 19 From letter dated February 21, 1951. All Benton quotes are from the Reginald Marsh Papers, Archives of American Art, unless otherwise specified.
 - 20 Quotes are from letters dated April 14, 1947, October 7, 1948, February 1, 1951, November 13, 1952, and October 20, 1941.
 - 21 Quotes are from letters dated October 22, 1941, and September 29, 1939.
 - 22 William Benton, "Reg Marsh, American Daumier," *Saturday Review of Literature*, December 24, 1955, 8–9. Benton wrote to Lloyd Goodrich on August 8, 1955, "You are the first one to comment on the fact that Reg was witty. Some of his paintings for me have their greatest appeal because of their wit." William Benton Papers, Archives of American Art. Other quotes are from letters dated October 14, 1945, September 16, 1941, and January 11, 1946, and Benton Papers, letter to Goodrich dated January 7, 1955.
 - 23 Information on *Playboy* from Dines-Levy and Smith, "Representations," 239–40, 250. Dressler, "Burlesque," 68–69.
 - 24 See James T. Farrell, *Studs Lonigan: Judgment Day* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1935), 385, and Higgins, *Burlesque Queen*, 109 and 197. For more on changing notions of sexuality, see John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).
 - 25 Such captions are found in *Titter*, issues dating 1946–48; *Giggles*, 1944–46; *Pep*, 1933–36; and *Snappy*, 1933–38, all magazines held at the Kinsey Institute. The device of having a figure in an artwork address the viewer is a convention of old master art, which greatly influenced Marsh. The identification of the artwork depicting Goodrich, Benton, and others is made in a typed, undated manuscript in Benton's papers. While the manuscript does not include the title of this work, "Strip Tease in New Jersey" is written in the margin in Benton's hand.
 - 26 For an article that reflects this slumming trend, see Gordon Manning, "Always Something Doing at Boston's Old Howard," *Collier's*, September 30, 1950. On the makeup of burlesque audiences, see Dressler, "Burlesque." Marsh quote is from the *Yale Record*, September 25, 1935. *Dancing Lady* (MGM, 1933), was produced by David O. Selznick.
 - 27 Henry McBride, *New York Sun*, 1933, Marsh Papers.
 - 28 My use of "liminal" is meant in the theoretical sense as a temporary or ritual space in which transformation of identity or social status occurs. See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), 94–130.
 - 29 *New York Times*, November 4, 1945; also quoted in a bulletin from the Moore Institute, Philadelphia School of Design, November 21, 1950, Marsh Papers.
 - 30 Adolf Dehn, "My Friend Reggie," *Democrat*, June 1943, 11; Thomas Craven, undated criticism, Marsh Papers. Marsh's comments confirm that he saw himself as different from the normal burlesque patron. As he stated in an interview for the *Yale Record*, "The burlesque show is a very sad commentary on the state of the poor man. It is the only entertainment, the only presentation of sex he can afford; it's a devilish plight"; quoted in Miller, "Charms," 38–39. For more on the historical associations of mass culture with femininity and consumption, and of high art with masculinity and production, see Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1986), 188–207.
 - 31 Brooks Atkinson, "Rumpus in City Hall," *New York Times*, March 22, 1942.