Vignette

The Postwar Redefinition of Self

Marisol’s Yearbook Illustrations for the Class of ’49

Albert Boime

One of the least understood pioneers of Pop Art has also been the lone female survivor of the movement, Marisol.1 Her ingenious tableaux assemblages that combine direct carving, painting, drawing, photographs, and found objects have consistently defied neat categorization. While not borrowing images directly from popular media, she nevertheless endows celebrities (including herself) and groups of ordinary types with the Pop Art look by whimsically presenting their physical presence and characteristic fashions in three-dimensional assemblages.

Early articles on the artist frequently employed terms like riddle, enigma, mask, and mystery to describe her personality. More recently, Nancy Grove has identified in her work a “unique, ongoing dialogue between the self and society that depended, in the 1960s, upon her ability to identify with people from every facet and level of society."2 Grove, however, has continued the tradition of mystifying Marisol’s work by evoking the theme of “magical mixtures” in the title of her catalogue.

Actually, Marisol’s work is tuned to a vital component of the Pop tradition that played off cartoons and comics for inspiration. Although she does not literally appropriate from cartoons, the whimsy and incisiveness of cartoon styles and caricatures inform her social and political characterizations. Marisol refers to the “funny papers” as one of the primal influences on her nascent talent, along with “fairy stories” and pictures of saints she had to copy in school. As a child growing up in Caracas, she enjoyed reading Spanish translations of comic books and strips: Dick Tracy, Donald Duck, and Popeye were her favorites. She also fondly recalls reading carefully rendered Mexican picture books of adult stories, with dialogue in balloons like the comics.3

Marisol’s work is rarely identified with cartooning because she works in three dimensions, yet she uses her medium graphically by often painting or drawing outlines of limbs on her blocky bodies and rendering heads on one or more sides of a cube—a hallmark of her style. In this sense, her work comes closer to the tradition of caricature than cartoons. Whereas Lichtenstein and Warhol cautiously inflected the comic images they appropriated from the mass media, Marisol constructs her figures with elements of irony and acerbic wit that comment on their distinctive physical and personality traits. She has stated: “I’m interested in people—how do you make someone look stately or sad, how can I capture their personality.”4 Although she claims she doesn’t consciously consider the caricatural tradition when she works, she nonetheless recognizes a “cynical” quality in cartoons that she feels is also present in her productions.

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working with theories, but theories that were inadequate to explain why only some of the material and some of the artists I found in the little magazines had found their way into art history’s discussions. Had I not done new fieldwork, I might have criticized the structure of Abstract Expressionism as I found it, but I would have had no alternative histories to propose. This is why I think some of the most important new work combines a deconstructive approach—a rereading of the canon to discover what is there but unacknowledged or missing altogether—with new materials derived from “empirical” research on artists and genres the canon has obscured.

Notes

An earlier version of this commentary was presented on 5 February 1993 at the Association of Historians of American Art session, “American Art and ‘The New Art History,’” chaired by David Lubin, at the annual meeting of the College Art Association.


One of her early role models was the sculptor William King, whose satirical exploration of social stereotypes using thin, cutout forms was also based on a three-dimensional cartoon-like style. When asked if she had ever encountered her doppelgänger, Marisol recalled an out-of-body experience shaped by a cartoonist’s sensibility: “I saw myself once, one evening when lying in bed, a shadow flying through the air, like a silhouette, a cut-out, front face.”

The silhouette, like the caricature, reduces the human profile to its most distinctive and recognizable traits. It also works to congeal the image into something permanent, to immutably fix the characteristic features of the body. Thus the often-interchangeable caricature and silhouette serve to contain change. They offer a means of controlling the dark and even terrifying side of the cartoon—its excessiveness and its threatening uncontrollability, which betray its origins in the child’s frightened response to the looming heads and bodies of adults. The fun and humor associated with cartoons hover at the threshold of panic—thus the typical puncturing of authority and mocking of power in cartoons. Marisol has stated that a portrait she did of her father as a sort of enthroned pope, for example, represented a way of freeing herself from the power of his influence on her life.
Marisol Escobar (top row), as shown with her classmates at the Westlake School’s Senior Ring Ceremony, 1949 *Vox Puellarum* yearbook

Marisol’s “magical” associations are also bound up with elements of her personality and the predominantly male-created mystique of her origins. She has been referred to as the “Paris-born Venezuelan” to justify her work as related to the search for identity in folk and primitive styles, a pursuit common to artists from both Latin America and the School of Paris. She herself has contributed to the mythology that has surrounded her work, as in the case of the dramatic performance as a panel participant in a symposium connected with the 1961 Museum of Modern Art exhibition “The Art of the Assemblage.” She took her place in the discussion at The Club (the Eighth Street meeting ground for the New York school) wearing a white Japanese-style mask. When the restless audience began demanding that she remove the disguise, she took it off only to reveal her face made up to duplicate the mask. Transforming her public persona into a living caricature of herself, she also did it as a “stunt” to make people laugh and underline the absurdity of the high-toned panel discussion.7

Marisol’s reclusive nature and long silences have also gained her a reputation as the “Latin Garbo.” My personal interest in the Marisol-Garbo persona was prompted by my recognition of the cartoon origins of her style. In a series of essays over the years, I have explored the importance of cartooning for American and European modernists.8 It should no longer surprise the historian or critic to learn that several famous American painters of high art either began their careers as cartoonists or dreamed of such careers prior to going to art school. Even so, I was amazed to discover young Marisol’s first public statement as a cartoonist in something as mundane as her high school yearbook. It seemed to me that with this discovery, the authentic Marisol began to emerge out of the chrysalis of legend. Not only do her early cartoons point to her mature interest in single figures of a particular social type, but they fill in an important part of her biography elided in previous accounts of her career. The year of her graduation, 1949, brings us to the very threshold at which most of her biographies begin—1950, when she settled in New York.

Born in Paris in 1930 to Venezuelan parents Gustavo and Josefina Hernandez Escobar, who made their money in oil and real estate holdings, young Marisol and her brother spent their early years traveling in Europe with their family. Later the family regularly commuted between Caracas and the United States. But the death of her mother in 1941 changed the pattern of Marisol’s existence. From that time through her high school graduation, she lived in one boarding school after another. “When I was 11,” she recalled, “I decided never to talk again. I didn’t want to sound the way other people did. I really didn’t talk for years except for what was absolutely necessary in school and on the street. They used to think I was crazy.” During World War II the family remained in Caracas, but in 1946 her father took her to Los Angeles, where they lived on Fremont Place in exclusive Hancock Park. She briefly attended Marymount High School (a Catholic girls school) on Sunset Boulevard across from UCLA, but her quiet ways disturbed the nuns

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who felt that she had a “bad influence on the other girls.” Moreover, Marisol’s artistic talents went unrecognized. Marymount’s yearbook for 1948 credits another classmate with “upholding the sole artistic talent with superior sense of feeling, color, and line.” The photograph of Marymount’s junior class seems to confirm Marisol’s own recollection of this time, for it displays her rather sullen expression amid a sea of grinning faces. In September 1948 she transferred from Marymount to the exclusive Westlake School for Girls on North Faring Road in Holmby Hills, also near UCLA, where she completed her senior year and graduated in 1949. Here the atmosphere proved to be more cosmopolitan and congenial to her temperament, and her artistic aptitudes were not only recognized but encouraged. That she felt more at home at Westlake is implicit in a group picture in Westlake’s yearbook, in which she is seen smiling serenely from the top row, amid the other girls participating in the school’s traditional Senior Ring Ceremony (fig. 1). Such early experiences of participation in a traditional ritual among classmates with diverse personalities may well have influenced her later autobiographical explorations in relation to community and class customs.

During her year at Westlake, she was chosen as the artist for Westlake’s 1949 yearbook, *Vox Puellarum* (Voice of the Girls), contributing greatly to its success. She not only produced a series of watercolor sketches depicting views of the school (fig. 2), but also executed witty cartoon vignettes to accompany the photo-portraits of herself and her classmates. That she had already made the choice to pursue an artistic career is evidenced in her sketch juxtaposed with her striking class photograph (fig. 3).

Comic strips and comic books, as well as animated cartoons, held a particular appeal for an entire generation of artists born around 1930, including Claes Oldenburg, Mel Ramos, Andy Warhol, Tom Wesselmann, James Rosenquist, and, of course, Roy Lichtenstein, the oldest of this group. Belonging to this generation myself, I would venture that those of us born just after the stock market crash and who experienced our adolescence between the Great Depression and World War II were afflicted by the

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peculiar pressures and anxieties of that chaotic period. The proliferation of comic strips and the emergence of the comic book industry and the first full-length animated cartoons around this time offered a convenient form of escape.¹¹ Like Marisol and countless other members of the artistic community attending high school in the late 1940s, I too drew a series of cartoons for my high school yearbook, including the conventional vignettes used to symbolize the various offices and roles of high school students and their faculty (fig. 4). The ironic content of cartoons and caricatures that began to overtake these staid publications during this time is, in my opinion, no coincidence.

Marisol’s high school yearbook cartoons, along with those of numerous other budding artists of this era, intersected with the early postwar period, the move to displace women from the workforce to make room for the returning GIs, and the zealous redefinition of the domestic realm as a female space. In the wake of the war, racism and gender redefinition lay at the heart of political propaganda that existed in cartoons and comics of the period, as well as in such feature films as *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), *All About Eve* (1950), and *Three Faces of Eve* (1957)—all sharing themes that emphasized the roles and fantasies of the “primal” female. Marisol’s yearbook cartoons, drawings by an immigrant female art student attending an exclusive girls’ high school with the affluent daughters of Hollywood celebrities during this postwar period, seem fertile ground for inquiry into the problem of artistic self-identity.

Cartooning also marked a striking departure from the style and techniques of the Abstract Expressionists. The use of the cartoon was a distinct strategy to reintroduce figuration that was consistent with modernist principles. Even Philip Guston, one of the pioneer Abstract Expressionists, culminated his career drawing upon his background as a cartoonist.

Part of cartooning’s appeal for lonely, introspective youths teetering on the brink of the 1950s was its humor. While Marisol’s satirical pieces grew out of her need to overcome depression and alienation, her use of satire and wit was foreshadowed in her high school work four years earlier. Her earliest sculptures started, she claims, “as a kind of rebellion. Everything was so serious. I was very sad myself and the people I met were so depressing. I started doing something funny so that I could become happier—and it worked.”¹² At the same time, her use of humor could seduce the spectator also looking for relief from the heavy business of everyday life.

Roy Lichtenstein, who was forbidden by his parents to read comics, is now wholly identified with comic book themes and techniques. He studied for a time under Reginald Marsh, a gifted cartoonist as well as a late disciple of the Ash Can school. The birth of the modern comic strip industry at the turn of the century (as distinguished from its “second coming” in the 1930s) coincided with the formation of America’s first modern movement
in painting. The pioneers, associates, and heirs of the Ash Can school sprang from the same roots as the pioneer cartoonists and even contributed directly to the development of the comic strip. Almost all began their careers as repertorial illustrators and cartoonists, including John Sloan, William Glackens, Everett Shinn, George Bellows, George Luks, Edward Davis (art editor of the Philadelphia Press) and his son Stuart, and Art Young. For a time, George Luks took over the drawing of America’s pioneer comic strip, “The Yellow Kid,” which portrayed the delinquents and immigrant characters of the tenement and slum districts of New York. When Luks turned to painting, he continued to depict the derelicts and urchins of the slum environment that had populated “The Yellow Kid.” Later, Stuart Davis, Art Young, and Reginald Marsh did editorial cartoons, as did the original Ash Can members, who revitalized the medium when Sloan became art editor of The Masses.13 The link between Marsh and Lichtenstein can be seen as establishing a bridge of continuity between the Ash Can school and Pop Art.

Marisol inherited some of the features of this tradition by way of her training under Howard Warshaw and Yasuo Kuniyoshi. Both teachers had studied with Homer Boss, a former student of Robert Henri’s. In addition, Kuniyoshi’s tutelage under Kenneth Hayes Miller at the Art Students League introduced him to the depiction of urban female types that may have made his instruction appealing to Marisol.

Marisol carried her caricatural approach and sense of humor into the area of painted wood assemblages with all sorts of extraneous attachments, much as cartoons first made their entry into high art by way of the collage, the forerunner of the assemblage. Pioneer Cubists and Dadaists were all enamored of the American comic strip (Duchamp actually began his career as a cartoonist and later published the work of Rube Goldberg). Picasso deeply admired American comic strips, and several of his papier collés, with their combination of drawn caricatures and pasted newspaper, possess the aura of a comic strip. Stuart Davis actually reproduced a daily cartoon panel in one of his early Cubist collage-inspired still-lifes, Lucky Strike (1924, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution). Kurt Schwitters produced a Pop prototype in 1947 with his For Käthe collage (1947, private collection), comprised of clippings from the Sunday comics section. Comic strip fragments began to appear with increasing regularity in the 1950s in collages identified with Neo-Dadaism. The artist Jess was the first to make collages comprised solely of comic strips, reconfiguring Dick Tracy sequences in a series entitled Tricky Cad, developed between 1953 and 1959. In 1958 Jasper Johns produced a modest work entitled Alley Oop (Collection of Mr. and Mrs. S. I. Newhouse, Jr.) to which he affixed a sequence of an Alley Oop comic strip and veiled it with paint, and the same year Warhol began painting individual comic strip characters. Thus Neo-Dadaism, Pop Art, and even the assemblage movement converged in their fascination with multiple images inspired by comics and film.

This convergence formed the matrix of Marisol’s development and mature vision and is wholly consistent with her early interest in cartoons. Her yearbook sketches attest to a remarkable precocity and prefigure her mature work. The sophisticated use of line in the cartoon vignettes and expert handling of the watercolor medium is unusual for so young an artist and points to Marisol’s professional training outside the classroom. For three and a half years she attended evening classes, traveling by bus to downtown Los Angeles to study drawing at the Otis Art Institute and under Howard Warshaw at the Jepson Art Institute on Seventh Avenue. At that time, the Jepson Art Institute was perhaps the most innovative art school in Los Angeles and provided a focus for an emerging art community. Guided by a philosophy of open, experimental education, the faculty included Warshaw, William Brice, Milly Rocque, and Rico Lebrun, whose charismatic personality and graphic talents galvanized the teaching staff.

4 Albert Boime, vignettes for 1951 Highlands yearbook, Hamilton High School, Los Angeles
In these schools Marisol learned to draw forms volumetrically—to imagine and model in three dimensions. Herbert Jepson, the founder of the Jepson Art Institute, recalled in 1976 that Marisol had come from one of the finishing schools around town, Marymount or some such place. I think she was a South American girl; she was very quiet and she studied primarily with Warshaw and was strongly influenced by him. Those three-dimensional figures seemed to reflect a kind of same figurative thing that he [Warshaw] was doing in his painting and drawing—highly stylized, yet realistic features. If you know, they look like enlarged clothespins with faces on them.

Thus Warshaw’s instruction provided one of the fundamentals of her mature development. Later, at the school of Hans Hofmann, she was taught to regard the space around the drawing—the “whole page and beyond it.”

Jepson’s assessment of the impact of Warshaw’s pen and ink technique, as seen in this untitled study in the Jepson Collection (fig. 5), is clearly apparent in Marisol’s yearbook sketches of her classmates. Warshaw’s loosely flowing ink lines, multiple and superimposed as if to reveal the process of “getting it right,” are echoed in such caricatures as the “Class Clown” (see fig. 3). Similarly, Warshaw’s gouache and ink study of a seated woman (fig. 6), with its drastically condensed modeling, crosshatching, and intriguing distribution of light and dark shadings, closely resembles her cartoon vignettes of two other classmates (fig. 7). Warshaw’s emphasis on a subject’s graphic qualities and on line to delineate a cubistic space seems to have informed her mature work as well, especially her portraits sketched on cubes, as in Bob Hope (1967, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution), or on blocks (fig. 8).

Despite a certain authoritarian posture, Warshaw would have been helpful in other ways to Marisol’s yearbook project. He himself had considered at one time becoming a cartoonist and had produced cartoons for his own high school newspaper. His personal whimsy comes through in his drawings of upended animals (fig. 9) and other imaginative depictions, including an anthropomorphic caterpillar tractor dating from the time of Marisol’s apprenticeship at Jepson (fig. 10). For a time Warshaw worked for Warner
Brothers drawing Bugs Bunny, and he later drew for Walt Disney. In fact, there were numerous points of contact between Disney and the Jepson Art Institute: Lebrun had worked for Disney, and Jepson had taught for many years at Chouinard Art Institute, turning out numerous animators and artists for Disney, who subsidized the school and later bequeathed to it an endowment that transformed it into the California School of the Arts.15

Warshaw and Lebrun saw themselves as the rightful heirs to the humanist tradition of the Renaissance and loathed what then passed for the avant-garde. They especially rejected the premises of Abstract Expressionism that "proscribed intellect while celebrating
randomness.” Although they disliked Pop Art as well (for celebrating “dated vulgarity”), they offered a powerful caricatural-like vision that offered the younger generation a way out of the dead end of abstraction and a way back into figuration. In the same sense, the use of cartoons and comic strips provided a stylistic alternative to the declamatory surfaces of Abstract Expressionism. The enlarged schematic comic image set next to the heroic canvases of the abstractionists had the effect of deflating their bombast, much as the comic strips poked fun at the haughty male character by having him slip on a banana peel. The comic strip style also lent itself to the sort of direct social commentary that was in demand in the late 1950s and early 1960s but was inaccessible to Abstract Expressionism.

Warshaw picked up on the romanticized Cubism of Lebrun (based in large measure on the example of Picasso’s Guernica), which he applied to animal and human forms (fig. 11). The result is often an acerbic graphic statement that reappears in Marisol’s work. Marisol, representing a younger generation, felt less pressure to defend the old master tradition against contemporary art and could more freely deal with vernacular imagery.

Working at the Jepson Art Institute under Warshaw gave the precocious Marisol a sophistication and perspective far beyond that of the average high school senior. Even more striking than her mastery of Warshaw’s techniques was her construction of conventional roles and types for herself and her classmates. Warshaw always delighted in the play of tension between the past and the present through the rendering of contemporary figures in traditional poses, stressing that a primary goal of art was to maintain this tension in expressive graphic form. Although the turn-of-the-century and early-twentieth-century fashions depicted by Marisol were in keeping with the anniversary theme of the yearbook, they permitted her to experiment with diverse possibilities for self-generated identities based on a synthesis of past stereotypes and the personalities of her classmates.

By its nature, the yearbook project offered Marisol the ideal forum for such explorations. The propaganda value of the modern yearbook is self-evident: Through it a school attempts to promote its position in the community and appeal to parents, develop a
sense of social cohesion within the school, emphasize a program of shared ethical and educational values, and establish a lasting document that perpetuates the self-image of the institution. The yearbook, like any other artifact embodying codes of representation, bears witness to the changing fashions of cultural and political beliefs. The importance of the yearbook lies in its construction of a group, or “class,” identity, often evoked in the periodic high school reunions. To this end each yearbook staff establishes a theme and an identity for the class of graduating seniors.

The *Vox Puellarum* of 1949 was built around a historical theme. Although the school was founded in 1904, the class of ’49 decided on a golden anniversary celebration. Photographs of graduating seniors were framed in ovals to imitate turn-of-the-century portraits. As art editor, Marisol sketched her figures in Gibson Girl–type dress consistent with the period theme and even ascribed the dates of her figures’ costumes and accessories (fig. 12). Divisions were demarcated by gold-dipped plates on which Marisol’s elaborate pen and ink outline sketches were reproduced (fig. 13). Throughout the Westlake School annual, Marisol’s artwork served as the unifying vision.

Even at this early stage, the elements of Marisol’s so-called legendary personality were already in place. In a rhyming essay summarizing the significant traits of the graduating students, we find for Marisol: “Venezuelan beauty, talented in art / Marisol, your quiet ways have captured each heart.” This pithy rhyme could be read as countering later assessments of Marisol’s mature persona as a calculated invention à la Warhol to publicize her art. Among those to dismiss such assessments was Cindy Nemser, who opened her section on Marisol in *Art Talk* by noting that “Marisol Escobar became famous during the 1960’s for her brilliantly satiric collaged sculpture, her own personal beauty, and her long mysterious silences.”

Marisol responded affirmatively to Nemser’s suggestion that her work exemplified her desire to “explore different aspects of woman’s identity” in anticipation of the women’s movement. She confessed that she enjoyed the mythmaking that formed around her in the 1960s because it reflected a multiple image of herself that she was exploring in her work.
I went along with it, just for the experience. Maybe it was a way of doing my art. But I also enjoyed it, because I am very curious. I like to do lots of different things. So at one point I was like a beatnik; then at one point I wanted to be a society girl; then a diver, a skier.\(^{18}\)

Marisol admitted her love of playing various roles, and her multiple incarnations exploit portraiture to discover the self in relation to society.

The Westlake yearbook is thus a precious document attesting to her need to explore multiple personas as early as her senior year in high school. (Such explorations recall the postmodern work of Cindy Sherman, who reinvented herself as countless personas, including a male and female high school student.)

Although expressed primarily in the form of vignettes complementing the photo-portraits of her classmates, Marisol's images forced her to conceive of personality types in relation to her own identity and professional choices. These vignettes included the skier, the traveler, the society girl, the bathing beauty (if not the diver), and the poet (if not the beatnik)—all types Marisol would later posit as alter egos in her mature work. That her early experiments were carried out within an exclusive girl's school in the pre-feminist era is noteworthy. Since Marisol became an important role model for such feminists as Gloria Steinem and Nemser,\(^{19}\) we may well speculate on the influence of Westlake on her unfolding personality.

Although in 1949 the pressure to restore American society to the pre-World War II patriarchy manifested itself in some of the messages attached to the photo-portraits, the wide range of career choices—scientist, business executive, and the like—with which Marisol identified her fellow seniors attested to a strong sense of potential and possibilities. Thus Marisol's aspiration in later years to navigate through a myriad of possibilities and roles may have been conditioned in part by her experience at Westlake. At the very least, Marisol's yearbook illustrations offered her the opportunity to express these possibilities symbolically. Each unique caricature complementing the personalities and ambitions of her fellow students can be seen as a variant of Marisol's manifold personality. Later, she would explore the idea of autonomy in such works as *The Wedding* (1962–63, Collection of Madelon and Martin Falxa) and *Dinner Date* (1964, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven), which present her as both bride and groom, host and guest. The editor of the Westlake yearbook recalled that even in high school, Marisol seemed "self-contained."

Marisol's cartoonlike approach was absolutely indispensable in opening up an avenue of expression denied her in the more traditional watercolors that she painted for the yearbook. The cartoon style liberated her imagination by encouraging her to identify with all the possibilities projected by her peers. The peculiarly American flavor of the vignettes may also have provided a way for the shy, foreign-born girl to feel at one with her new community. Such a need to find an expressive outlet would not have been surprising.
during the McCarthy era of the late 1940s and early 1950s, when all cultural differences were being homogenized.

My own special talent for cartooning during this same time gave me an entrée into areas of school life and social activity that would otherwise have been denied me. American historians of the comics are forever fond of opening their narratives with the statement that the comic strip “is a uniquely American art form.” And indeed cartooning offered me, a child of immigrant parents, the possibility of participating in an indigenous cultural practice with obvious nationalist overtones. Marisol may have likewise wished to tap into the nation’s cultural wellspring through cartooning. Her satirical yearbook images of spoke-wheeled jalopies, for example, resemble similar images in turn-of-the-century American cartooning—an allusion she later brought to her mixed-media assemblage entitled The Car (fig. 14).

The exclusive character of Westlake and its affiliation with the wealthy Hollywood colony may have made an important contribution to Marisol’s visual social criticism. Many of Marisol’s classmates were the daughters of movie stars, prominent film directors, and other Hollywood celebrities, to whose homes she was invited. Accustomed to mingling with the elite through her family’s connections, Marisol became familiar enough with the actual lives of celebrities to allow her to distinguish from the advertised image and the mundane reality. Hence her biting insights characterizing such works as John Wayne (fig. 15), whose cubic cowboy head is covered by a smiling publicity photograph of the hero. Wearing a dark suit and tie, the cowboy rides a merry-go-round horse (a motif prefigured in her yearbook cartoon of a classmate as a rancher). Equally sardonic is the construction of fifteen versions of herself (thirteen guests and two servants) in The Cocktail Party (fig. 16), all festively attired and coiffured like the characters in her yearbook vignettes.

Marisol’s vignettes ironically followed the male chauvinist precedent of Charles Dana Gibson and Howard Chandler Christy, whose female types were associated with a
particular era. In 1936 Fairfax Downey’s profusely illustrated biography of Gibson revived the reputation of the illustrator, and in 1949 Christy still stood as the doyen of American illustrators. Gibson’s and Christy’s ubiquitous illustrations of women, cast into symbolic roles and characterized by distinctive period costume and coiffures (figs. 17, 18), would have been invaluable for young Marisol’s research. Not surprisingly, several of Marisol’s yearbook vignettes (fig. 19) mimic the silhouettes, poses, and costumes in these works. Later, she would update The American Girl tradition with her community of Marisols, as in Women and Dog (fig. 20), succinctly described by Dore Ashton in 1964: “[Marisol] appears as a plump, very Latin looking little girl; as a slim, very New York looking big girl; as a bride, and—perhaps equivocally—as a bridegroom; as a chorus-girl type; and as a Madison Avenue matron.”

Marisol’s precocity and worldly background equipped her with a perspective that made her more politically aware than her adolescent peers. “In the fifties,” she recalled,

> when I came to this country, the students were really unaware. I didn’t want to go to college because it was so dead there. Only a few people were protesting. They were the beatniks. I used to hang around with them in the Village, and everyone thought they were a bunch of kooks.

For Marisol, the protest movement of the sixties seemed like a déjà vu: “I’d been here [New York City] for twenty years and used to hang around the beatniks, and those people all thought that way. It’s not something that happened because a few students thought of it in 1968.” Marisol’s experience in New York, where she had moved in 1950 to study at the Art Students League and later at Hans Hofmann’s school, marked the emergence of her new politicized self. The graduate of the class of ’49 had not yet experienced the impact of the political conversion of China to Maoism, the announcement of the Soviet atomic bomb, or the explosive issues of subversive infiltration raised by the Alger Hiss case in August and September of 1949. These shocks placed the Right in an ascendant position and polarized society. The beatnik community Marisol associated
with offered a kind of passive cultural protest to this rightward shift. Suddenly, the stereotypes that she had formulated for her yearbook began to take shape as mordant clichés on American social behavior.

Most Americans in the postwar period were weary of war and drastic change in domestic life, a reaction fed by the prosperity and enormous social and economic opportunities that had come to exist by 1949 for the white middle class. The reformist trajectory of the New Deal, which had mostly benefited the newly emergent middle class, was now seen as unnecessary. On the Right, New Dealers were linked with Communism and held responsible for destroying individual initiative and free enterprise. The start of the Cold War era was marked by a conservative desire to turn the clock back to the pre–New Deal days. It is no coincidence, then, that the retrogressive theme and vignettes of Marisol’s 1949 yearbook look backward to the Gibson Girl era and Christy’s WASP princesses. And yet it seems clear that Marisol’s later representations of women in stultifying social roles also derive from the types depicted in her cartoon vignettes.

Although most middle-class white women did not consciously challenge the ideology of feminine domesticity or collectively oppose their traditional subordination, they experienced the contradictions between their previously paid employment and their unpaid labor in the home. The “new” old-fashioned look helped mask women’s subordination and depoliticize female discontent by associating it with femininity and female “nature.” Christian Dior even resurrected the nineteenth-century “hourglass figure.” In the postwar period this “feminine mystique” was incorporated into a Cold War ideology that circumscribed the options of both women and men. Conservatives equated gender nonconformity with political subversion: radicalism,
under the guise of feminism, meant the destruction of the family. Women had to limit themselves to those activities and functions that the official patriarchy designated for them, including aggrandizing their suburban homes with the latest consumer goods to fuel the economy and thus keep the Evil Empire at bay.

Marisol’s generation, coming of age just after World War II, experienced the tension between women’s empowerment in the workplace during the war and the constraints later imposed on their enormous postwar potential by the emerging redefinition of the female sphere. Marisol’s vignettes probe the outer limits of this sphere, representing her classmates in terms of their professional awareness while casting them in outworn gender characterizations of the past. On the verge of adulthood in postwar America, Marisol was ideally positioned to grasp, yet be influenced by, gender-appropriate propaganda as a form of social conditioning to inculcate fixed roles.

Marisol’s vignettes of young women moving toward careers and fields once reserved exclusively for males are ironically couched in the traditional and familiar trappings of a bygone era. This contradiction points metaphorically to the clash between the American rhetoric of equality and the patriarchal discourse that in fact imposed limits on this ideal. In this sense, it may be said that by winning acclaim against such odds, Marisol’s later critical works exploded the gender definitions that informed her yearbook cartoons and set constraints upon her self-identity.

Notes

I am deeply grateful to Marisol for granting me time for an interview and permission to reproduce her yearbook artwork. I also wish to thank Lynn Cordner-Shafer (née Wheeler), who, as the editor-in-chief of Vox Puellarum in 1949, brought to my attention the illustrations of her fellow student, Marisol. William Brice, Harry Batlin, Marcia Shlaudeman-Jepson and Herbert S. Jepson, and Mark Ferrer generously shared with me their recollections of Warshaw. Thanks too to Denise Bratton, Jill Weisbord, and Myra Boime for their review of the essay and constructive suggestions.


4 Gardner, p. 150.
7 Ibid., p. 148.
10 1948 Marianage, Marymount High School, Los Angeles, pp. 52–53.
18 Marisol, quoted in ibid., pp. 181–82.
23 Marisol, quoted in Nemser, pp. 188–89.
21 American Art
Phil Stong ends his great regional novel, *State Fair* (1932), as night steals over the empty exhibition buildings and the deserted midway. Farmer Abel Frake loads his truck and pulls out of Des Moines, headed for home. In the dark intimacy of the highway, he consoles his tearful daughter with the assurance that there will be another Iowa State Fair next summer and the summer after that, for all the smiling summers of her life: “Next year we’ll be back up here again—unless you’re here with your own family.” Like Thanksgiving and Christmas and the Fourth of July, the fair is a fixed point on the turning wheel of time that rolls along the darkened highways of the Mississippi Valley and out onto the slumbering plains of the American heartland.

The peak of the national season of celebration comes in the winter, starting with Halloween and running through New Year’s Day. There are packages sealed with ribbons, Santa Clauses, football games on TV, and electric lights aglow in the night. Everybody watches the Tournament of Roses parade, of course, but the bang-bang-bang concentration and the timing of these holidays seems calibrated to the demands of brisk city people, for whom the indoor months often mark the busiest stretch of the fiscal year. County fairs are different. Fairs and small-town festivals, rodeos, pageants, and powwows take advantage of long, hot, lazy afternoons, when the crop is in the ground, the sun is in the sky, and there isn’t much to do but wait for the harvest. These are outdoor events, and the flat, sharp line of the horizon, at the edge of the earth, is always close at hand. The land, the soil—the rhythms of festival life in the countryside of middle America are agricultural and its rituals tied to the eternal verities of place.

Inside, under the rickety trusses and the spindly columns of fairs of the past, reposed the towers of apples, baskets of grain, and the giant produce that most visibly supported local claims to greatness. At today’s fairs, the object is to show marketable crops, what the customer wants—produce uniform in size and appearance. Despite the emphasis on agribusiness, however, there is usually a monster pumpkin or melon to be found among the even rows of perfect ones, a hangover from the early days, when foot-long potatoes, eighteen-pound radishes, and cabbages so large “one could not be crowded into a flour barrel” were sources of pride and wonderment, sure to capture the blue ribbons. Mammoth vegetables, together with “the largest hog” in Wyoming or Wisconsin, were symbols of fecundity and accomplishment—things of beauty in a frontier economy of scarcity and travail.

“Salem Sue,” the giant concrete cow who looms over I-94 on the flat, lonesome haul from Mandan to Dickinson, North Dakota, is a memorial to the too-big fair exhibitions