



Howard Chandler Christy, as he appeared in February 1918, in front of the lens of Arnold Genthe (Arnold Genthe Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC)

Introduction

DURING THE JAZZ AGE, the most celebrated artist in America, if not Europe, was not Grant Wood, Edward Hopper, or Georgia O’Keefe. It was also not Henri Matisse, Edvard Munch, or Pablo Picasso. Norman Rockwell? No, it was not even the great Rockwell.

This artist was a once-blind illustrator-turned-portrait-painter who, until his dying day, was referred to by many as the “Barefoot Boy from the Blue Muskingum.” By 1938, *Time* magazine proclaimed him “the most commercially successful U.S. artist.” He typified the quintessential American dream, and his achievements captured, illuminated, and influenced the extraordinary times in which he lived—an era that spanned the Gilded Age, the Spanish-American War, World War I, the Roaring ’20s, the Great Depression, the Golden Age of Hollywood, World War II, and the post-war boom of the late 1940s and early 1950s.

His name, now forgotten to many, was Howard Chandler Christy.

In this day and age, it is difficult to comprehend thoroughly the true extent of the tremendous success and popularity that Christy achieved during his eighty years of life. This is primarily true because he was an artist not of today, but of an uncommon epoch that extended from the late nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth century. It was a time of exceptional growth in population, industry, technology, and culture in which one could witness the birth of the automobile, airplane, and luxury liner, all within a few short years of each other. This exciting chapter in history also saw the rise of the modern news media and mass

advertising, both extremely powerful tools that would forever sway and motivate the general public's sentiments in politics, commerce, fashion, and even warfare. In the first part of this remarkable era, the public's informational and entertainment needs focused on newspapers and magazines, while during the latter part, radio and motion pictures dominated the scene. In every medium, Christy's artistic influence was present, if not profound.

Advancements in science, medicine, and architecture also contributed to the flourishing expansion of the time, giving rise to the dawn of a new social order, one marked by fabulous wealth, glamour, and elegance but set against a backdrop of intense political, economic, and racial turmoil. Out of this unprecedented phase of America's development emerged a new culture, one consisting of ambitious business tycoons, charismatic political leaders, fearless military heroes, and sultry matinee idols, the likes of which the world had never seen before and will likely never see again. Many of these luminaries, like Christy, sprouted from humble beginnings to be eventually hailed as living deities. Even today, some of them, long since departed, are instantly recognized by their names or faces, icons forever etched in the minds of millions as being legends in their time. Yet only a select few were honored by having Christy's masterful hand immortalize their figures on canvas, preserving their best traits, their youthfulness, and their beauty for future generations to admire and venerate.

In viewing the essence of Christy's life, one can say that it was primarily centered upon beauty—specifically physical beauty—mostly of people but also of nature. In the same vein, he was fascinated with portraying the deeper inner beauty found within God's creations, an attribute that distinguished him from almost every other artist of his time. Christy did not merely look at his subject and then apply paint to canvas in an attempt to mimic in color what he saw in flesh. To the contrary, he would observe, study, and oftentimes research his subject. In most cases, he would spend hours, if not a few days, first conversing with and enjoying the pleasure of his benefactor before beginning a commission. The

time that Christy spent absorbing the internal beauty of his sitter permitted him to convey in oil paint the person's true character and personality, a subtlety that photography could never reproduce.

In 1924, one perceptive interviewer succinctly characterized Christy's unique talent of depicting his subject's inner spirit in this way: "It is undoubtedly Mr. Christy's ability to thus comprehend and present to others through the medium of brush and canvas the inner self of the men and women whom he paints that makes his portraits stand out from those of other artists, until today he is known as America's foremost portrait painter."

In rendering portraits, Christy would delight in depicting his subjects' most impressive attributes with such an exquisite charm and tenderness that, upon completion of his work, they would invariably be stunned. On closer inspection, they would remark that they never knew how strikingly handsome or beautiful they were. This was his passion. He adored all things beautiful, and he painted them "in the grand manner" like that of Thomas Gainsborough, Joshua Reynolds, and John Singer Sargent. This was how he was instructed as a young student, and in his opinion, like that of his distinguished clientele, this was the best style for the highest form of art he knew—portrait painting.

More important, Christy's graceful painting style reflected the refined and genteel tastes of his patrons and the distinctive times in which they lived.

The measure of Christy's greatness, however, is not just found in the splendor of his art or his mysterious ability to seize on canvas a person's inner and outer beauty. It can be seen in his life story—an incomparable journey of how he rose from poor Midwestern beginnings, much like that of Mark Twain, to become the most successful and famous painter of his time, acquiring a celebrity status akin to that of a modern-day rock star. Unlike most artists—whose lives were generally replete with frustration, loneliness, despair, poverty, and the inevitable untimely ending—his life was so charmed with energy, excitement, opulence, and fame that it reads like a script for an epic motion picture.

Born in a log cabin in Morgan County, Ohio, during the winter of 1872, Christy lived as a young boy on an Ohio farm overlooking the Muskingum River Valley. There, from high among the bluffs under cloudless skies, he watched whistling steamboats ferrying worldly passengers to exciting unknown destinations. As he viewed the steady streams of smoke trailing off in the horizon, he vowed that he too would travel far one day, even farther than the steamboats, and would learn to “paint big pictures of big things.” He made good on that promise.

At the age of eighteen, Christy ventured to New York City with two hundred dollars in his pocket and a dream of becoming a distinguished artist. He studied under various artists of the Art Students League in New York City and, a year later, under William Merritt Chase, the foremost American impressionist painter of that era. Within only a few months under Chase’s direction, Chase declared Christy to be the most brilliant student he had ever taught. A few years later, at the age of twenty-three, Christy got his big break and began drawing illustrations, first for *Century* magazine and then for *Harper’s Weekly*, *Scribner’s Magazine*, and *Leslie’s Weekly*.

With the advent of the Spanish-American War in 1898, Christy traveled alongside the United States Army in Cuba to record in visual form the encampments, the battles, and the horrors of warfare. On his way there, he met then Colonel Theodore Roosevelt and witnessed firsthand the bravery of Roosevelt and his Rough Riders. Christy’s sketches, many of which were published in weekly magazines as large two-page centerfolds, became the focal point for tens of thousands of American readers whose only glimpse of the crossfire would come not from photographs but from these works. By August 1898, Christy’s pictorials became so popular that *Leslie’s Weekly* published Christy’s own personal account of the war in six separate installments. The critical acclaim that Christy received from his stories about the war helped him convince Roosevelt to commit his own story of the conflict to Charles Scribner’s Sons. Roosevelt listened, and his account, titled *Rough Riders*, became an instant best-seller upon its 1899

release. The relationships that Christy forged and the images that he produced during this war guaranteed his future success as an artist whom America would adore.

Upon returning to New York City, Christy became a noted illustrator of books and magazines. He would typically earn between four hundred and a thousand dollars—a phenomenal sum for that time—to produce four to six illustrations per week.

Ever enterprising, Christy ventured away from merely making storybook pictures, the usual fare of illustrators of that day, and instead concentrated on portraying a new figure emerging in society, one that was liberated, wise, youthful, zestful, and self-reliant. It was the modern American woman.

Motivated by his friend and colleague, Charles Dana Gibson, Christy invented the “Christy Girl,” an idealized portrayal of feminine perfection intermixed with independence and confidence. With some of the most beautiful women in America as his models, Christy borrowed upon their best qualities to create a romanticized, statuesque goddess who would redefine the concept of feminine beauty in the early twentieth century and influence fashion for decades to come. The Christy Girl was virtuous, athletic, secure, graceful, and determined. But above all, she was undeniably beautiful, and America could not get enough of her. Countless books, calendars, and prints with her face and figure were sold. Shoes, hats, and dresses—and even dances and an entire musical—were named after her. People would frame pictures of the Christy Girl and place them throughout their homes. Men would write letters proposing marriage to her. Newspapers held contests in the hope of finding her living personification. She became an American icon of beauty.

By April 1917, Christy’s fame and dexterity for painting glamorous women catapulted him from the ranks of celebrity painter to that of a superstar. As World War I escalated, the United States government capitalized on Christy’s success and his ability to influence American tastes. To build morale, the government recruited him to paint alluring women for posters that would compel

thousands of young men to join the military and others to help the war effort. Everywhere one went, a captivating Christy Girl would beckon him to join the Army, Navy and Marines or to “Fight or Buy Bonds!” Christy generously donated his time and talent during World War I and, on numerous later occasions, painted posters for patriotic and humanitarian causes.

After portraying captivating women for two decades, whether for commercial illustrations or for war posters, Christy became renowned as the premier authority on feminine beauty. When the Atlantic City Businessmen’s League wanted to produce a fall beauty pageant as part of an effort to entice summer tourists to remain in the New Jersey seaside town after Labor Day, it was only natural that Christy would be selected as judge. This two-day pageant, first held on September 7, 1921, eventually became known as the Miss America Pageant. Christy was the only famous artist serving as judge in that first pageant. He was the chairman of the judges’ panel and would remain in that role for another three years, serving alongside his close friends and colleagues James Montgomery Flagg, Coles Phillips, Charles Chambers, and Norman Rockwell.

In the fall of 1921, at the insistence of Nancy Palmer Christy, his former model and new bride, Christy abandoned illustration in favor of portrait painting, which he considered to be a far superior art form. With commissions coming in daily, he soon became the preferred painter for presidents, generals, movie stars, socialites, and famous personalities of the era. He would go on to paint the faces of countless notables, including presidents Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman; aviators Amelia Earhart and Eddie Rickenbacker; humorist Will Rogers; publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst; and Allied General Douglas MacArthur.

Indeed, the “Barefoot Boy from the Blue Muskingum” had arrived, and America received him as its foremost painter and portraitist.

As his rare talent became in exceeding demand, Christy’s fame and achievements also transcended international boundaries. He

was asked to paint Europe's royalty, nobility, and principal leaders, including the Prince of Wales, Benito Mussolini, Prince Phillip of Hesse, and Crown Prince Umberto of Italy.

In between the important portrait sittings, Christy always seemed to have time to entertain his favorite pastime. He loved painting beautiful young women, specifically the best America had to offer. And, because of his exceptional talent, they all came to him to be painted. In a June 1935 *Movie Classic* article titled "Who Are the Beauties of Today?" journalist B. F. Wilson remarked, "Howard Chandler Christy has been painting beautiful women ever since he began his famous career as an illustrator and portrait painter. He has seen all the great beauties of the past forty years. He has known them all. He has painted them all. And today he stands alone as an authority on beauty." With America's most gorgeous women at his call, Christy indulged his passion for immortalizing the feminine physique in all its glory. A select few of these curvaceous beauties, particularly those who were the most vibrant, graceful, and charming, he invited to pose for his special paintings—the nudes.

Not surprisingly, wherever Christy went, he was hounded by press reporters, columnists, and radio personalities. Each hoped to be the first to land a story that would detail Christy's latest travels and disclose the warm friendships that Christy developed with his celebrity patrons. Each wanted to be the first to announce to the public the intimate hours Christy would spend observing, conversing with, and capturing in paint his famous subjects. Then, they would invariably inquire about his trade secrets. How did he produce, in a week or less, a masterful likeness of his sitter in the grand styles of Gainsborough and Reynolds? What was his magic? How was this humanly possible? Christy would generally indulge them with a glimpse into his artistic genius and give them a little insight behind his adroit brushstrokes. No doubt, he would also provide a firsthand account of his humble beginnings, his artistic heroes, and his philosophy on fine art. After these interviews, the reporter would leave little, if any, of

Christy's statements on the cutting room floor. People wanted to know everything about him.

In 1939, the United States government commissioned Christy to recreate on canvas the momentous signing of the Constitution of the United States, an accolade that he considered his finest achievement and the crowning glory of his illustrious career. The monumental work became the largest painting on canvas in the United States Capitol—and the largest in America—when unveiled in May 1940. In the twelve years following, he would continue to receive large commissions to paint historically important events and would also paint biblical works inspired by his love of Christ and his devotion to God, whom he credited for miraculously restoring his eyesight from blindness years earlier.

Despite his declining health in the early 1950s, Christy continued to apply his usual vigor to the passion that was his life. Even then, the demand for Christy's work far outstripped his ability to supply it. Yet he continued his usual daily pace of painting from nine in the morning until four in the afternoon, diminishing his routine only after he suffered a heart attack, less than three months before his death on March 3, 1952.



MANY YEARS EARLIER, while interviewing Christy after he had painted President Coolidge's portrait, an unidentified but observant journalist remarked, "You can learn a good deal about a man's work by talking about it with him; but if you want to find out about the man himself, go straight to the headquarters—ask his wife." So the interviewer did just that and was aptly rewarded by his insightful discussions with Nancy Palmer Christy.

Described as having "the softest of real golden-blond hair, gray-blue eyes, regular features, and the loveliest complexion imaginable," Mrs. Christy was her husband's model, muse, best friend, and true love. The two were inseparable. During that same interview, the journalist then perceptively discovered, "They seem to have a mutual admiration society—these two—and Mrs. Christy's loyalty and affection are reciprocated in overflowing

measure by her husband. No wonder they are such a popular couple—wherever they go, they are much sought after, not because of Mr. Christy’s reputation, but because they are so attractive and such awfully good company.”

It is then fitting that this interpretative biography is written through the eyes of the person who knew the artist best. Fortunately, Mrs. Christy kept fairly detailed records of her life with her husband in the form of letters, diaries, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, and an unfinished biographical manuscript. Accordingly, the narrative is told through the perspective of Nancy Christy and, when the occasion merits, transitions to the voice of the artist himself.

An Affair with Beauty—The Mystique of Howard Chandler Christy is not a definitive biography. It does not reveal every deep wrinkle or smooth perfection of Christy’s life. Rather, its purpose is to distill his essence and character—and to provide a distinct impression of his immense genius and popularity during the time in which he lived.

In short, this is a portrait of the artist in words . . . as his wife, Nancy, remembered him.