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# American Girl: The Iconographies of Helen Wills

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**Abstract:** »*American Girl: Die Ikonografien der Helen Wills*«. The 'American Girl' this paper considers is Helen Wills, the top-ranked women's tennis player from 1927 to 1934. Wills was the subject of numerous narrative and visual representations as well as many self-representations in both words and images. Reading Wills in the context of Henry James's Daisy Miller and the popular magazine Gibson Girl, the paper considers the mechanisms by which national symbols are constructed. In particular, it examines the ways in which Wills's style of playing, her clothes, and even her facial expression came to signify a particular version of modern, American femininity (in contrast to that of opponents such as Suzanne Lenglen and Helen Jacobs). It also explores her identity as a white Californian, a neo-classical girl next door, who appealed to Nativists like James Phelan and Gertrude Atherton and whom Diego Rivera placed at the centre of 1931 Allegory of California. In short, Helen Wills proved both a very flexible American symbol and a global celebrity.

**Keywords:** Tennis, Helen Wills, national personification, visual representations.

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## 1. Introduction

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What does it mean to be an, or the, "American Girl"? Or, more precisely, did it mean something different in the 1870s, when Henry James used the term of his eponymous heroine Daisy Miller, in the 1890s, when the Gibson Girl was in full flight, and in the 1920s, when the phrase was applied to a tennis player called Helen Wills? And how do the categories of "American" and "Girl" match up? How stable is either one? What oppositions are implied? And how did either or both facilitate what the literary historian Susan Manning calls the "double feat of 'national' and 'personal' embodiment" (Manning 2013, 44-5)? Using an epithet to designate a real person, in other words, is different from "the personification of 'the nation' in symbol or image," whether officially sanctioned, "as with Marianne and France," or emerging unofficially, "as in the cartoon stereotypes of John Bull, the lean Yankee Uncle Sam and the 'German Michel'" (Hobsbawm 1983, 7). While invented figures have no say in the evolu-

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tion of their meaning, real people like Wills say and do things in the world that can dramatically change the “cultural work” they perform (Tompkins 1986).

The top-ranked women’s tennis player from 1927 to 1934, Helen Wills was the subject of numerous narrative and visual representations in newspaper stories and newsreel films, autobiography, biography, fiction, portraits and self-portraits, sculptures, and all manner of photographs that appeared on the fashion and society, as well as the sports pages of the popular press. In order to perform their iconographic “double feat,” those representations, often self-consciously, relied on a complex, and evolving, “poetics of performance and comparison” (Manning 2013, 5). In other words, representations of Helen Wills can only be understood when her image (as American Girl) is considered in relation to a whole range of other images, involving other tennis players, but also boxers, movie stars, and invented figures from classical and popular culture.

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## 2. From Daisy to Theodosia

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In 1926, after being beaten by the great French tennis player Suzanne Lenglen in a much-hyped contest in Cannes, the twenty-year-old Wills went to Italy to play some lucrative exhibition matches. An art major at the University of California, Wills was keen to see “everything that was famous and historic” (Wills 1937, 96) – which included, in Rome, the traditional visit to the Coliseum by moonlight. Sitting on a rock, or rather on her boyfriend’s handkerchief on a rock, she had all the right Romantic responses until, disturbed by a breeze, she suddenly felt afraid and “insisted on leaving, the handkerchief forgotten on the stone” (ibid., 97). I mention this scene from Wills’s autobiography because it so nicely links her to the long tradition of American travellers to Europe and, in particular, to the archetypal American Girl of fifty years earlier, Henry James’s Daisy Miller. In James’s novella, the trip to the Coliseum proves fatal – Daisy’s recklessness in visiting a place notorious for malaria leads to her death. Wills, of course, escaped contagion, but in her unsophisticated delight in European treasures and experience, she is at times quite Daisy-like.

But there is more to the comparison than tourism. James’s novella is all about the temptations and dangers involved in viewing the eponymous protagonist as “an American girl” (James 2013, 6). While Daisy’s young brother can name her thus without a second thought, Winterbourne – the expatriate American whom they encounter and from whose point of view the story is largely told – struggles to define just what the phrase means. Winterbourne is determined to find a “formula” to apply to Daisy – is she “exceedingly innocent” or instead “a designing, an audacious, an unscrupulous young person?” (ibid., 12-3). He struggles to reconcile the “range of effects” that make up Daisy Miller, for her “charming little parts” refuse to “match” and make a coherent “*ensemble*” (ibid., 8). The real source of the story’s tragedy is his inability to accept

what he calls “the riddle of her contradictions,” and his determination to impose a reductive typology upon “his shiftings of view” (ibid., 60). But where Winterbourne fails, Henry James, a more subtle student of human nature, succeeds, not because he does away with national, and other, “types” but because he undermines their stability and adds nuance. Ultimately, then, it is Daisy’s very fluidity – she’s “constantly moving” (ibid., 11) – that characterises her in both “personal” and “generic and national” terms (ibid., 57). She is, after all, a recognisable American Girl.

*Daisy Miller* was published in 1878 and while it explores many of the distinctive features of that decade’s leisure class, it does not include any mention of tennis, a game that was soon to become a staple of upper- and middle-class club and hotel life on both sides of the Atlantic. Had Daisy gone to England instead of Italy, she might have played a set or two. Indeed, in 1877, the year before the novella was published, James wrote a series of sketches on the English countryside, and in one of them, on Warwickshire, he describes coming upon dozens of games of lawn tennis involving “a great many ‘nice girls’, as they say in England” (James 2011, 115-6), a characteristic Jamesian strategy of putting a category into scare quotes but using it anyway. “Nice” implies middle-class respectability, but also, here, a new and modern way of being middle-class and respectable. James, an American expatriate, finds Englishness much more stable, and ultimately less interesting, than his own nationality – Winterbourne, after all, finds it very difficult to ascertain whether Daisy “was in fact a nice girl” (James 2013, 41). Nevertheless, when James points out the tennis players’ “flexibility of figure and their freedom of action” (James 2011, 116), he seems to be describing more than the way they move, despite their restrictive clothing. What more this is becomes clear in the follow-up observation that they return from the court “flushed a little and a little dishevelled” (ibid., 116); like Daisy, then, the tennis players are sexually appealing precisely because they are just about blind to their own sexuality. They are, in other words, still “girls.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1904, a year before Helen Wills was born, Winfield Scott Moody (no relation of Wills’s husband, Frederick S. Moody) wrote an essay considering what Daisy Miller might be like thirty years on. Well-educated and “incredibly self-assured,” the twentieth-century Daisy, she concluded, “would never go to the Colosseum at midnight” (or perhaps would bring along an American and his handkerchief). She was also “six inches taller” than her predecessor, “the product of plenty of fresh air and exercise,” “athletic yet well-developed”; “as a physical product she is near perfection” (Moody 1904, 17). This Daisy, “reincarnated with a difference” (ibid.), was Theodosia Van Armingher, a.k.a. the Gibson Girl. Named for the Charles Dana Gibson pen-and-ink drawings that had appeared on the cover of popular magazines such as *McClure’s*, *Life* and

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<sup>1</sup> One of the players James observed that day was Maud Watson, who went on to win the first Wimbledon Ladies Singles title in 1884 (Elks 2011, 139).

*Collier's* since the 1890s, the Gibson Girl offered an alternative model of modern American femininity to the politically ambitious New Woman. Education and sport were the key to her “self-assurance” but that did not mean that her goal, and that of her counterpart at *Scribner's*, the Christy Girl, was not the traditional one of marriage and the production of another generation of healthy Anglo-Saxon Americans: “The hand that swings the tennis racquet is the hand that rocks the cradle, and rocks it all the better for having learned a swifter service” (Christy 1906, 38). Theodosia’s accomplishments, in short, served to cement her position in the home and in the nation, as the “pinnacle of evolutionary accomplishment” and the conduit to “American domination on a world stage” (Patterson 2005, 34).

But just as importantly – *more* importantly to the magazines on whose covers she appeared – the Gibson Girl was both an insatiable consumer and an appealing commodity herself. What made the brand so enduring was its combination of easily recognisable features (a narrow-waisted woman with piled-up hair to reveal a long neck) and flexibility. In 1902, the editor of *Collier's*, Robert Grant, distinguished seven types: the Beauty; the Boy-Girl; the Flirt; the Sentimental; the Convinced; the Ambitious; and the Well-Balanced. “Readers were encouraged to identify their own ‘type’” (Patterson 2005, 34) and advertisers paid attention too, defining particular niche markets. The ideal, however, was the “well-balanced,” the category that encompasses all the others. Women could do all manner of things, it was implied, as long as balance was achieved: for example, an 1890 *New York Times* article was keen to challenge the view that “fashionable young women [at summer resorts] do nothing but dance all night and sleep all day” by pointing out that every morning, “the belles of the hop of the night before can be seen ‘serving’ with a vigor that can only come from well-developed muscles” (Aron 1999, 73, 75). “Well-balanced” was the word that somehow resolved the “riddle” of Daisy Miller’s contradictions – however uneasily – to produce a safe and stable version of the “American Girl.”

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### 3. Modern Girls

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What happens, however, if we reintroduce some instability and, rather than “balance” them out, consider some competing versions of American girlhood? What happens, in particular, to the familiar story of tennis as a symptom of the 1920s “rebellion against Victorianism” (Coben 1991)?

Historians discussing the transformation of tennis from a nineteenth-century upper- and middle-class pastime into twentieth-century mass spectator sport often single out as a pivotal moment the 1919 Wimbledon Women’s Final, when a French player, Suzanne Lenglen, defeated Dorothea Lambert Chambers, who was British. The two women had very different styles of play, but what has come to represent the “symbolic battle between the old and the

new” (Hargreaves 1994, 116) – “the passage from the pre- to the post-war world” (Wilson 2014, 57) – are the players’ clothes. Chambers wore a buttoned white blouse and a skirt that finished just above the ankles, Lenglen a short-sleeved loose white dress that ended just below her knees. It is tempting to suggest that Lenglen’s defeat of Chambers sartorially enacts the “visual emancipation of women” (Horwood 2002, 48), but, although 1920s tennis dresses certainly represented an extension of the 1870s desire for “freedom of movement,” other factors were also important. A less obviously feminist story features Lenglen, and Wills too, at the hub of a rather newer coming together of sport, fashion, and celebrity. While dress can be “a form of visual art, a creation of images with the visible self as the medium” (Hollander 1993, 311), it is not always clear what that art is trying to say.

Despite the well-balanced Gibson Girl’s claim to have resolved the issue, anxieties remained about whether sport and freedom were compatible with traditional understandings of femininity. Lili d’Alvarez’s divided skirt caused a ruckus in 1931 – “whether we like it or not,” complained the *Daily Sketch*, “girls will be boys” (Horwood 2002, 57) – followed a couple of years later by Helen Jacobs’s tailored shorts; an event which earned a *New York Times* headline (New York Times 1933, 21). Now celebrated as a gay and Jewish pioneer in women’s tennis, Jacobs played down her ethnicity (outside of the Jewish press) and concealed her sexuality, although “dark rumours” circulated (Tinling 1983, 97; Borish 2014). Partly because she shared her first name with Wills, and partly because they really did dislike each other, the press styled their games as an ongoing “Battle of the Helens” [Figure 1]. Wills openly disapproved of Jacobs’s unfeminine shorts. A pleated skirt was far better, she claimed; its “grace and beauty in action” was “one of the reasons why women players are often more pleasing to watch upon the court than men” (Wills 1928, 138). In her 1937 crime novel, *Death Serves an Ace*, Wills pointedly describes her surrogate Betty as “the best proof that a woman doesn’t have to look like a weight-lifter to be good in sport” (Wills and Murphy 1937, 69).

A rather more subtle use of the medium of clothes to create a drama of opposites occurred in 1926 when Wills played Lenglen at Cannes. Lenglen wore a “shrimp-colored” georgette bandeau (Tinling 1983, 46) – a style she had already made famous, and which was widely copied and parodied as a “headache band” (Illustrated London News 1927) – while Wills stuck with the “useful and practical” eye-shade she had worn since she was fifteen (Wills 1937, 54). But what meaning could be extracted from the difference between these methods of keeping hair out of one’s eyes and, indeed, from the difference between these two athletes?

Figure 1: Tom Webster, Detail of "The Feminine Touch," *Daily Mail*, July 8, 1935



#### 4. Wills vs. Lenglen

The most familiar story was America vs. France, a reprise of Henry James's classic narrative: "the innocence of the New World pitted against the deceitfulness of old Europe" (Wilson 2014, 64). It was a dichotomy that had already proved popular in the post-war era. In 1921, the staging of a dramatic confrontation between Colorado-born heavyweight boxer Jack Dempsey and European light heavyweight champion Georges Carpentier, dubbed the "Orchid Man," attracted 80,000 spectators. When Dempsey won, the American press concluded that vigorous frontier spirit had seen off European decadence. Carpentier had been very well paid to take part in the mismatch (he was considerably lighter than Dempsey), and the event is now remembered less for its boxing than as the first million-dollar gate. The real winner was the promoter, Tex Rickard. Rickard took a sport that was male and working class and "ballyhooed" it into a prime box office attraction (Boddy 2008, 210-5). Although starting from a very different place – as an upper middle class recreation associated with women – the Lenglen-Wills match also represented a step towards mass spectator sport. Not everyone was happy. Tennis was not boxing, the *New York Times* cautioned, warning that events like this were in danger of "denaturing" the leisure class activity through a combination of "bad manners" and "commercial spirit": "tennis is nothing if not a game for gentlemen and gentlewomen" (New York Times 1926). While professional boxing had recently been legalised, tennis operated in a hinterland of what was known as "shamateurism" (Tinling 1983, 41). At Cannes, rumours were rife about gambling, competing newsreel rights and "under-the-counter payments to 'amateur stars'"

(ibid.)<sup>2</sup> Most commentators, however, preferred to forget money and concentrate on metaphors of “American [...] Power and Stamina” versus “Crafty [French] Generalship” (Danzig 1926, 5). Paul Gallico happily spilled his “purple ink” with the rest of the sportswriters but he later regretted that “what should have been no more than the finals of a completely unimportant French winter resort tournament” had been transformed “into a combination of *Ben Hur*, *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Fireman Save My Child*” (Gallico 1965, 166).

Some styled Lenglen a flapper because she wore make-up and rolled-up stockings, liked smoking and dancing, and nervously punctuated games with “liberal sips” of iced and sweetened cognac (Tinling 1983, 47). Never mind that the flapper “had become passé by 1923” (Fitzgerald 2005, 112), and that Lenglen was rather too old and sophisticated for the role; its evocation allowed Wills, still in plaits at twenty, to be presented as “the antithesis” of that “gaudy, gin-drinking” figure, and thus exactly “What America Needed” (Smith 1927, 16). Another narrative cast Lenglen as a rather different, if also outmoded, version of femininity which is often confused with the flapper: the vamp. While the flapper was young, foolish, and out of control, the vamp was calculating, rather sinister and, importantly, foreign. “The movie vamp was a figure known to us all,” recalled Gallico, “she wore slinky clothes, her eyes were made up to look like Cleopatra’s in her palmiest days, her mouth as though she had absorbed a bucketful of paint.” On this reading, Lenglen’s dress and style of play were less an expression of freedom than a careful ploy to be “the cause of some poor slob’s downfall” (Gallico 1965, 163): commentators pointed out a strategy behind her supply of “intermittent glimpses of bare thigh” and the sexual connotations of her “very visible silhouette” (Tinling 1983, 25). Lenglen was ballyhooed into “a bitch composed of Pola Negri, Theda Bara and the Medici Gang all rolled into one” so that, once more, Wills could be presented as “her exact opposite” – an “easily recognisable ingénue heroine,” a “100 per cent clean soup-and-water virginal American girl,” something closer to Hollywood’s self-styled “average American girl,” Mary Pickford (Gallico 1965, 164).

But there was more to Lenglen than (magazine caricatures of) flapper stockings and (Hollywood dramas of) vampy lipstick. She was also Bohemian, “highly strung,” an *artiste*. Comparing tennis to ballet helped ward off fears about the sport’s “ungainliness” and its potential to produce “thick ankles” (Horwood 2002, 52): it also suggested an affiliation with the high culture glamour of Isadora Duncan and the Ballets Russes.<sup>3</sup> “The Pavlova of tennis” (Engelmann 1988, 26) – she later wrote a book with Duncan’s British protégé Margaret Morris – Lenglen was associated with graceful movement, and in

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<sup>2</sup> Wills was on the payroll of the American International News Service and had been given “at least £10,000 worth” of couture clothes (Tilding 1983, 41).

<sup>3</sup> Dance, in turn, wanted to be affiliated to sport. Jean Cocteau’s ballet *Le Train Bleu* (1924) included a tennis player wearing a Chanel-designed bandeau.

particular with the full cross-court stretch in which she has been memorialised at Roland Garros in Paris. Wills, on the other hand, was a slow-moving baseline power hitter; “nothing,” she said, “is more fun when playing than to hit the ball hard and see it go flying over the net” (Wills 1928, 84). Lenglen’s style of play, requiring extension and balance, and suggesting that everything hung on each “astounding mid-air fluttering” (Engelmann 1988, 6), lent itself well to visual representation. Wills’s steady accretion did not; it was just not “showy” (Satterthwaite 1926, 666). Perhaps that is why, as advertisements through the 1920s and 1930s testify, the Lenglen stretch became metonymic for tennis itself and why the stretch was often transposed on to the American Girl herself. For example, Alexander Calder’s 1928 wire and wood sculptures combine Lenglen’s stretch and Wills’s cap (perhaps easier to make than a wire bandeau?), while Miguel Covarrubias’s cover for the August 1932 *Vanity Fair* retains the pose but shifts “the emphasis from grace and elegance to power and presence” (O’Mahony 2012, 54).

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## 5. Poker Face to Juno

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Because she’s always Cool as Custard  
And never seems the Least Bit flustered,  
The Journalists, a Ribald Race  
Have Named her “Little Poker Face”  
(Guiterman 1929, 19)

So far I have been considering Wills largely by what she, as “American Girl,” was *not* – home-grown flapper, foreign vamp, ballet dancer. More positive interpretations emphasised Wills’s power, accuracy and what her contemporary Ernest Hemingway called “sincerity.” And yet even the narrator of Hemingway’s 1926 novel *The Sun Also Rises* cannot define this quality without recourse to negative definition: “it is not brilliant [...] only perfect” (Hemingway 2006, 218, 220). In Wills’s case too, perfection seems to have something to do with Taylorised waste reduction – “the ideal thing in tennis was to achieve the best results with the least possible expenditure of energy” (Wills 1937, 27) – but also a kind of affectlessness (the least possible expenditure of emotion). When she was fifteen Wills acquired a nickname, “Little Miss Poker Face,” suggesting not so much sincerity as the strategic concealment of emotion. The sobriquet became so ubiquitous that when she published her tennis manual in 1928, Wills felt the need to explain how she had acquired it:

Perhaps it is because, when I play, I become entirely absorbed in the game. It may be a form of concentration. It must be this, as I know that I am not entirely without feeling upon the court. (Wills 1928, 105)

Concentration was not an unambiguously desirable quality. “Not the least of Lenglen’s charm” was her ability to play without “any apparent severe concen-

tration” and even to smile; magazines often warned women to avoid “that dreaded ‘tennis face’ which is so very unattractive [...] when all the muscles are strained to the utmost attention and each stroke seems to be made with a visible and sometimes painful amount of effort” (Satterthwaite 1926, 666). In a context in which both femininity and amateurism seemed always to need emphasising, Wills’s “tense concentration” suggested both a “professional attitude” and “the killer type” of prizefighter (Literary Digest 1929, 56). Helen Jacobs, whose femininity Wills challenged, countered by comparing her opponent’s tennis court style to that of the boxer Gene Tunney; both “fought” with “implacable concentration and undeniable skill but without the color or imagination of a Dempsey” (Jacobs 1999, 74). Paul Gallico, however, who perhaps knew more about boxing, thought that Wills was “as ruthless and relentless a killer as was ever Jack Dempsey, and never for a moment revealed mercy or pity” (Gallico 1965, 168). Despite, or because of, these qualities, Wills inspired “crushes” in both women – “previously a boarding school phenomenon,” scolded F. Scott Fitzgerald (2005, 102) – and men – Charlie Chaplin thought Wills’s style of playing tennis involved “a healthy appeal to sex” (Chaplin 1992, 351).

All sorts of other comparisons were made. Those who found her dull compared Wills to the homely President – she was “the [Calvin] Coolidge of the courts,” “a Methodist minister at a funeral” (Engelmann 1988, 164, 166). The patriotically minded said she embodied “the calm security and dogged determination of young America” (Satterthwaite 1926, 666); the cynical translated that to mean she was “a business woman of the tennis courts” (Tunis 1929, 168).<sup>4</sup> Those whose frame of reference was Hollywood, and who noted her desire to be alone, deemed Wills “the Garbo of tennis” (Tinling 1983, 98). Like Garbo’s, however, Wills’s “face-object” perhaps suggested “less the theme of the secret” than “that of an archetype” – all of these interpretations were possible because it was “not in the least expressive” (Barthes 2000, 56).

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## 6. “So Many Strings to Her Bow”

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Wills disagreed. Instead she liked to suggest that tennis was only one of many media in which she might “express” her “personality” (Wills 1937, 194). Recalling a well-balanced Gibson Girl more than Dempsey or Garbo, she urged her readers to forego “training” and special diets for “moderation” in all things (Wills 1928, 134). And so, despite jokes that she preferred to talk of Titian rather than tennis (Life 1930), Wills asserted that “tennis and art balanced each

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<sup>4</sup> Tunis developed the theme with great gusto in his 1930 novel, *American Girl*, which was adapted and softened for Hollywood as *Hard Fast and Beautiful* (1951).

other” (Paramount Newsreel 1936). In 1929 the *New York Times* featured a picture of Wills and her easel under the banner “The Champion and Her Hobby” but, technically, it was the other way round. As an amateur, tennis could never officially be a “career” (Wills 1937, 3) while “art” offered legitimate income. Wills expressed herself in many places: in magazines, which published sketches of her fellow players; in advertisements, which used her “pictorial impressions” to advertise everything from corsets to elevators to transatlantic travel [Figure 2], and at New York’s Grand Central Art Gallery, where she exhibited her oil paintings. She was also named as the “designer” of corsets and bathing costumes, but perhaps her most successful venture was the tennis-themed fabric she created for the Stehli Silks Company [Figure 3]. On the whole, however, as *The New Yorker* wryly observed, she would not have been able to place very many of her drawings if they had been unsigned (Smith 1926, 18).

**Figure 2:** Advertisement for the Otis Elevator Company, *The Literary Digest*, June 30, 1934

Our own application of the “follow through”

“Follow through,” says the tennis instructor, as he shows a youngster the fine points of the game. “Follow through,” advises the golf pro, as he watches a pro’s make his swing. In every sport that calls for the swinging of rackets or clubs or bats, the “follow through” is absolutely essential to championship form.

The importance of the “follow through” should really be as strongly emphasized in business as in the sports. Witness this example:

An Otis elevator is designed and manufactured with universally recognized care and knowledge—thus insuring the correct “stroke.”

Again in installing that elevator, the work is done by Otis with the same care exercised in its manufacture. Here begins a practical application of the “follow through.” But this is really only the beginning. One more important step is necessary to complete the full swing—maintenance of that elevator by its manufacturer.

Otis Maintenance can best be described as this: A service that keeps elevators in championship form. Keeps them running perfectly—maintains safety—and holds the installation at the same level of efficiency as the day it was installed.

Otis Maintenance does these things at the lowest possible cost. At a reasonable, fixed monthly rate. Full details available at your local Otis office.

**OTIS** ELEVATOR COMPANY

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These drawings made for Otis Elevator Company by Miss Helen Wills Moore

**Figure 3:** 'A Game of Tennis'



Printed silk crêpe de chine dress fabric, designed by Helen Wills for Stehli Silks, New York, 1927. Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

When most sport figures “went literary” they hired a ghost writer, but Wills quickly considered herself a “fully fledged” author (Engelmann 1988, 216; Wills 1927, 118). As well as journalism (mainly interviews with other tennis players), she published a collection of poetry, *The Awakening* (1927), and, in collaboration with Robert Murphy, a crime novel, *Death Serves an Ace* (1939). Unsurprisingly, however, her most popular books were her autobiography, *Thirty-Fifteen* (1937), and *Tennis* (1928), an instruction manual that was praised for its “sincerity,” “clean-cut sentences,” and lack of “fine writing” (Colburn 1928, 329). In Vladimir Nabokov’s most famous novel, Humbert Humbert drives sixty miles to buy a copy for his sporty teenaged love, Lolita (Nabokov 1991, 242); she is an “agile, leaping nymph,” just like Wills (The Youth’s Companion 1926).<sup>5</sup> Scott Fitzgerald’s editor at Scribner’s, the legend-

<sup>5</sup> A copy of *Tennis* is also promised to Nicky, the rising star of Noel Steatfield’s 1937 novel *Tennis Shoes* (Streatfield 2015, 263).

ary Max Perkins, worked with Wills on both the manual and autobiography and, while he admitted she was “beautiful in her way, and strong and healthy, and natural in a way you like to think is American,” he struggled with the fact that she “can’t write” (Tarr 2003, 144). *Time magazine* agreed – “In Mrs. [Wills] Moody’s hand, the racket is mightier than the pen” (*Time magazine* 1939). Rebecca West compared Wills’s poetry with that of James Joyce, but only in order to argue that, in verse at least, Joyce “is entirely without taste” (West 1987, 14-5).

Wills was not unique in using her celebrity to launch other ventures; as John Ellis notes, “the basic definition of a star is that of a performer in a particular medium whose figure enters into subsidiary forms of circulation” (1982, 98). But in her case the tie-ins went further. The idea of Wills as a Gibson Girlish all-rounder, well-balanced – or, as she styled it, “restless” – in her talents became central to her image (Wills 1937, 195). In 1928, the *Pittsburgh Press* reported (as a news story) some remarks to that effect made by the then elderly Californian novelist Gertrude Atherton:

Gertrude Atherton, novelist, singles out Helen Wills, tennis champion, as America’s most beautiful girl. That girl, Helen Wills, is our despair. Even before this last laurel we have marvelled at one girl with so many strings to her bow. We have marvelled at a Helen who not only wields a racquet, but who can wield a brush and pen and earns laurels as an artist and as a writer. And here comes the last straw – America’s most beautiful girl. When the gods love, they love! (Sumner 1928, 18)

Not only well-rounded then, with many strings to her bow, but blessed, divinely chosen... Helen indeed.

The theme was picked up in *Vogue* the following year, when a profile photograph by Edward Steichen was accompanied by an article reinforcing the idea that readers were looking on “the grave and lovely face of Juno” (Anet 1929, 105). Although Wills had long been admired as “physically a 100 per cent specimen of girlhood” – or so her doctor said, after removing her appendix (*Washington Post* 1926, 6) – it was not until the end of the 1920s, when she acquired a bob and some couture clothes, that stern little Poker-Face started to be described, and photographed [Figure 4], as a classical beauty. Once again, the appeal emerged from a comparison – in this instance, classicism versus modernity. Profile portraits were often the means to establish the former: for example, in the title sequence of *Grand Hotel* (1932) Garbo playing a Russian ballet dancer past her sell-by date, is presented in profile, while Joan Crawford, as a modern, dynamic girl-next-door stenographer, faces the camera.

**Figure 4:** Dorothy Wilding 'Helen Wills Moody'



Bromide Print, 1933 (218 mm x 174 mm). Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

Somehow Wills combined the two roles to become the classical girl next door. Classicism and localism were not always incompatible – especially not in California in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when she was taken up by Atherton and James Phelan, former Mayor of San Francisco and Democratic Senator. A keen supporter of American imperial expansion during the 1890s, Phelan also styled himself as a classical republican, believing that an educated, and wealthy elite were poised to shape “an impending high American era, an ascendancy of art and good government, together with a full presence on the international scene” (Starr 1973, 250). Wills was part of that elite; as Ted Tinning later recalled, she “projected the impression that everyone should automatically recognize her superiority in whatever area of life she chose to favour” (Tinning 1983, 97). She became a close friend of Phelan’s and a frequent guest at his neo-classically baroque Saratoga country estate, Villa Montalvo. In 1927 Phelan commissioned Haig Patihian to make a marble bust of Wills, “Helen of California” (which is now on display at the De Young Museum in San Francisco) and he also wrote an ode to the tennis player, praising her for inspiring “the generations building up their store” to greater “glory” (Engelmann 1988, 296). San Francisco, he felt, was poised to become another Augustan Rome or perhaps, since topographically more appropriate, another Periclean Athens: both Athens and San Francisco, said Atherton, had “the same girdle of sea and hills. The same open-door and out-of-door life” (Leider 1991, 316). Helen was its Queen, its “Girl of the Golden West.”

There was, however, a nativist element to all this classicism. Phelan's celebration of the Californian "soil" was intimately tied up with his campaigns to retain that soil for what he called "our own people" (Modell 1977, 45). Concerned that Japanese immigrants were buying farmland and discouraging white migration into the state, Phelan repeatedly campaigned for "Asiatic exclusion legislation, as well as the Alien Poll Tax (California 1921) and the Alien Land Laws (California, 1913 and 1920)." Phelan's ambition, as his 1920 campaign slogan put it, was to "keep California white" (Howell 2015, 104). Atherton too decried immigration and the fact that America had been "maculated by inferior races" (Atherton 2012, 93). For Atherton, Wills was not only a Greek "Helen" but a "Nordic princess" like the "smiling and gracious and infinitely remote" heroine of her 1923 bestseller, *Black Oxen* (2012, 119, 108). On this reading, the distinctive aspects of Wills's style and persona – its "sincerity" and "clean-ness" – is clearly coded white. Wills's own writing supports this view. *Death Serves an Ace* stages a Wimbledon final between fair-haired, "honey-colored" Betty – "Venus, Aphrodite, mixed with a bit of the Victory of Samothrace (with arms, of course) and a few pounds lopped off" – and Marie Azarin, a "dark-skinned, hawk-faced" Mexican, "whose game was built upon a series of bird-like swoops" (Wills and Murphy 1939, 67-9). Readers would have easily recognised the pair as lightly disguised versions of Wills, who claimed her eyeshade prevented her "from becoming weather-beaten and sunburned" (Wills 1928, 141), and Lenglen, who was often described as a "falcon" (Engelmann 1988, 172). But, freed by fiction, Wills and her co-writer go further: "There was a kind of savagery in the latter's play that writers call 'colorful,'" notes the narrator, "but it was to me a quality that hinted of jungle ancestors" (Wills and Murphy 1939, 68).

Nativist and classical discourse also mingled freely in the run up to the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics, whose promoters tempered the tourist appeal of a "pre-modern and non-white" past with an insistence that the "non-Anglo heritage was best seen in its comparative testament to WASP progress since the turn of the century" (Dinces 2005, 142). The 1924 Olympics had indicated to some that "Americans were getting soft" – too many medal-winners, Scott Fitzgerald lamented, had names with "few vowels in them," in other (familiar) words, "ancestral vitality" was dimmed and what prowess remained came from "fresh overseas blood" (Fitzgerald 2005, 135-6).<sup>6</sup> The Los Angeles games were presented as not merely a "Depression-buster" (Literary Digest 1932) but as the beginning of a new, and whiter, era, for both the state and the nation, "initiating," said Gertrude Atherton, "something of the ideal of Greece's glorious age of Pericles":

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<sup>6</sup> Wills – with her Anglo vowel – won two gold medals.

We have the courage to reinstate the human body [...] our athletes, from Helen Wills down, are earning laurels from the world and soon we will stage the first Olympic games in the new world. The platonic ideal of poise, spiritual, mental and physical health is being approached. (Leider 1991, 316-7)

But down the hill from Mount Parnassus, when the visiting Japanese team tried to visit LA's restaurants, they were "met at the door with 'Mexicans are not admitted.' 'We are not Mexicans, we are Japanese' was the answer given with some pride, but that made matters worse" (Byas 1932, E7).

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## 7. Wills as Allegory

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Two years earlier, the Mexican artist Diego Rivera was invited to San Francisco to paint a 30-foot high fresco, an *Allegory of California*, on the walls and ceiling of the stairwell of the Pacific Stock Exchange Luncheon Club [Figure 5]. This was Rivera's first American commission and many worried that he would paint the capitalist citadel red. In the event, any revolutionary subtexts are easy to miss.<sup>7</sup> Also known as "The Riches of California," the mural depicts the state's vibrant economy, past, present, and future. At its centre is a "large female figure," whom Rivera said was "California itself": "a woman of tanned skin and opulent curves modelled after the rolling hills of the landscape," wearing a necklace of golden wheat and offering, in one huge hand, "the subsoil of the miners, and, in the other, the ripe fruits of the earth" (Rivera 1935, 14). She resembles both the Aztec Earth Mothers that Rivera had depicted in his earlier work and Pomona, the Roman goddess so often evoked by California's fruit industry [Figure 6]. To some extent, then, Rivera's imagery continued "whether he knew it or not, the Arcadian metaphors California's boosters had promoted since the nineteenth century" (Holliday 2016, 339). And yet the figure is also associated with more modern iconography. In front of her are an engineer holding mathematical instruments and discussing a blueprint with a mechanic, and a boy with a model airplane (representing an industry in its infancy). Moving up the staircase, viewers follow a progression from miners, under the soil, to a skyline filled with oil rigs, derricks, cranes and ships, and on the ceiling, planes and two nude women flying through the sky. The Futurist dynamism of the ceiling figures counters the static monumentality of the central, almost Cubist, figure, reflecting perhaps Rivera's view of California as occupying an "intermediate" position or representing a "transition stage between the industri-

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<sup>7</sup> Two possible signs of capitalism's unsustainability can be found at the far left of the mural: a pressure gauge is shown to be entering the dangerous red zone, while Rivera signed his name in red beneath a redwood tree stump.

al East and primitive, backward Mexico” (Rivera 1935, 14).<sup>8</sup> Mexicans, however, play no part in the mural, although in one preliminary sketch, the central female figure is a woman whose face recalls Rivera’s 1920s Cubist-inspired paintings of Indian peasant women and who looks out at a slight angle into the middle distance, with a kind of melancholic stoicism [Figure 7].

**Figure 5:** Photograph of Diego Rivera, *The Riches (Allegory) of California*, 1931. City Club of San Francisco



Photograph by Kasia Boddy.

In the final version, however, Helen Wills was the model for all three of the mural’s women. Rivera sketched her both in the studio, where he produced “a

<sup>8</sup> These dynamic flying women are like planes themselves, unlike the reclining pregnant figure (modelled on Rivera’s first wife Guadalupe Marín), surrounded by planes, at the centre of *Tierra Fecunda, con las Fuerzas Naturales Controladas por el Hombre*, Universidad Atónoma de Chapingo, 1926.

monumental drawing in sanguine,” and at the tennis courts where he made “a series of action shots” (Wolfe 1963, 290-1).<sup>9</sup> Little attention was paid to Wills’s depiction as the central “‘flying’ body” (ibid., 291) – it was merely a metonym among metonyms<sup>10</sup> – but the fact that she was recognizable as “California itself” did raise objections. An allegory, the Committee complained, should not be “a portrait of any one individual.” In response Rivera “generalized the face and figure” but, as his friend Bernard Wolfe pointed out, “it is still the generalized head of Helen Wills Moody” that we see (ibid., 290). While the hair was darkened, the features – as well as the piercing blue eyes and inscrutable stare – were “recognizably hers” (Rivera 1991, 107).

Rivera’s adoption of Wills rather than the Mexican woman was, I think, more than a simple white-washing of Californian identity to suit the tastes of the lurching stockbrokers. It was also an attempt to rethink the nature of allegory in the mass media age, to question how iconography might function differently than it had before. Classical or folk iconography might retain its meanings in local or even national contexts, but the internationally circulated imagery of celebrity (for all that it announced its ties to classicism and folk culture) trumped both. “California was known abroad mainly because of Helen Wills Moody” (ibid.), Rivera insisted, and so Helen Wills Moody it had to be – but not because she meant something specific or various about California or America, but simply because she was famous.

**Figure 6:** Detail of Diego Rivera, *The Riches (Allegory) of California*, 1931. City Club of San Francisco

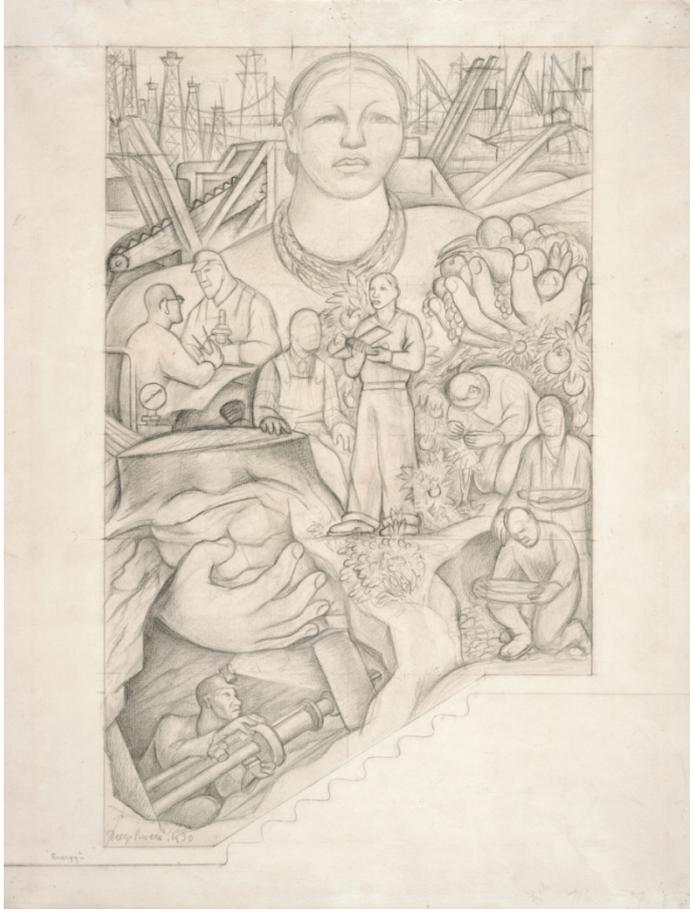


Photograph by Kasia Boddy.

<sup>9</sup> The drawing is now on display at the Tate Modern in London.

<sup>10</sup> The others are horticulturalist Luther Burbank, gold prospector James Wilson Marshall, and artist Victor Arnoutoff.

**Figure 7:** Diego Rivera, 'Energy', study for the main wall of the mural Allegory of California, 1930



Graphite on Paper. Courtesy of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

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