

TELL ME A STORY WHERE THE BAD GIRL WINS: THE LIFE AND ART OF BARBARA SHERMUND

Barbara Shermund is an unheralded early master of gag cartooning. Her sharp wit and loose style boldly tapped the zeitgeist of first-wave feminism with vivid characters that were alive and astute. Shermund's women spoke their minds about sex, marriage, and society; smoked cigarettes and drank; poked fun at everything in an era when it was not common to see young women doing so; and included nods to queer audiences.

In Liza Donnelly's book *Funny Ladies*, she writes "What comes through in many of the cartoons is that Shermund's women did not need men."

Born in San Francisco in 1899, Shermund attended the California School of Fine Arts before relocating to New York City. As one of the first women cartoonists to work for *The New Yorker* in the year of its launch in 1925, she created nine covers and hundreds of cartoons for the magazine. Shermund later became a mainstay at *Esquire* and contributed to the *Journal American*, *Life*, and *Collier's*. Her syndicated newspaper cartoon, Shermund's

Sallies, was published by King Features, and she also illustrated a variety of books and advertisements.

In 1950, Shermund was among the first three women to be accepted as a member of the male-dominated National Cartoonists Society. She lived a private life and traveled extensively. Without ever having a formal studio space, she preferred drawing at the kitchen table, and should an idea strike her in the middle of the night, she slept with a notepad and pencil under her pillow.

Through original art, photographs, clippings, and books, this exhibition uncovers and celebrates the life and career of this outstanding cartoonist.

Curated by Caitlin McGurk

With gratitude to Amanda Gormley, Andie Near, Ann Lennon, Anne Drozd, Cameron Sharp, and Jeremy Stone.

All objects on display come from The Ohio State University Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum's International Museum of Cartoon Art Collection unless otherwise indicated.

Self-portrait

ca. 1940s

Watercolor on paper



"How do I look, Grandma?"

"Very nice, dear."

"NICE!"

ca. 1928

Ink and gouache on board

Brandywine Museum of Art

Purchased with Museum funds, 1993



YOUTH AND AGE

In many of Shermund's cartoons, she plays with the naiveté, freedom, and longing that make up the humorous nature of youth and aging. As a sharp and talented young woman living independently in 1920s New York City, Shermund found endless inspiration in her everyday surroundings, and the liberation of her generation. Two major personal events also shaped her understanding of intergenerational dynamics: the loss of her mother when she was a teenager, and her father's second marriage to a woman thirty-one years younger than him. These

experiences informed the sensibility of Shermund's art, and she processed them with humor and stinging sarcasm.

"Why didn't you call earlier, dear? I was on pins and needles."

March 11, 1933

The New Yorker

Ink on paper

Stern and DeScenza Family Collection



"Mother, had you known many men when you married Daddy?"

"No, dear."

"Well, I think that's a shame."

December 3, 1927

The New Yorker

Ink and gouache on illustration board



"Stop 'Madaming' me!"

September 16, 1944

The New Yorker

Ink on paper

Stern and DeScenza Family Collection



This was Shermund's final published cartoon in *The New Yorker*, after nearly two decades of contributions. Changes in tone and content were underway at the magazine amid cultural shifts in society at large. Harold Ross, the magazine's founding editor, passed away a few years later in 1951.

"Be thinking about what you'd like for lunch and dinner, Alfred."

October 15, 1927

The New Yorker

Ink, Conte crayon, and gouache on illustration board

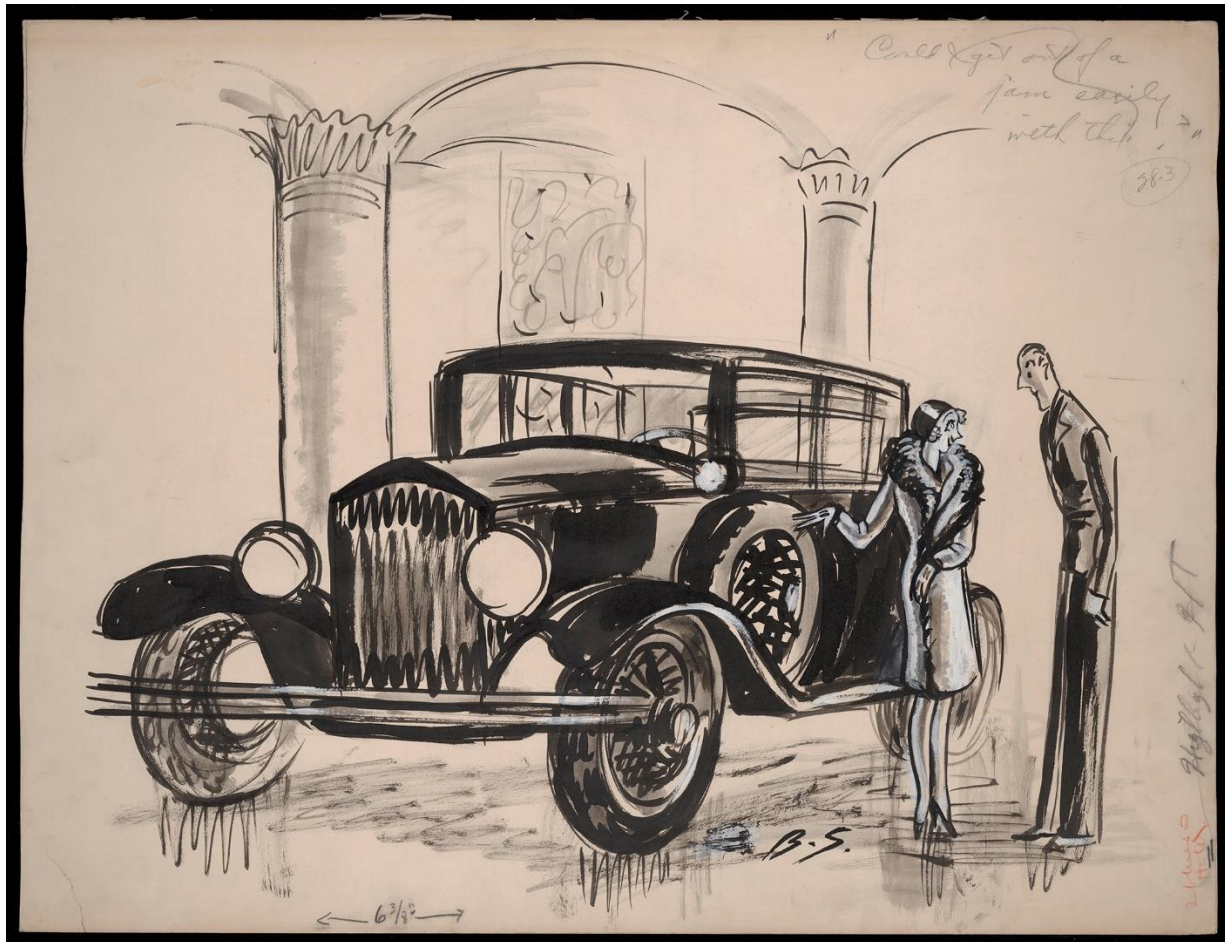


"Could I get out of a jam easily with this?"

January 12, 1929

The New Yorker

Ink and gouache on illustration board



"Remember Mother — I'm only a child!"

ca. 1930s

Publication unknown

Ink and gouache on illustration board



"Evelyn, speak more respectfully to your father!"

"Oh Mother, don't be so pre-war!"

ca. 1927

Publication unknown

Ink and gouache on illustration board



"He just inherited a million dollars."

"Oh, but that's so devitalizing!"

November 1, 1930

The New Yorker

Ink and gouache on illustration board



"They're just typical, aren't they."

ca. 1928

Publication unknown

Ink and gouache on illustration board



"Here are the death notices, Grandma!"

ca. 1928

Publication unknown

Ink and gouache on paper



"Why what's the matter with Gladys?"

"Good gracious, Mother, she wants to play house!"

ca. 1930

Ink and gouache on illustration board



"Now Mother, what did I tell you about this sort of thing?"

November 22, 1930

The New Yorker

Ink and gouache on illustration board



RELATIONSHIPS AND GENDER DYNAMICS

Shermund loved to draw women, and they were the kind you want to befriend. They confide in and conspire with each other, lament life's petty problems in operatic terms, and create scenes in which the reader feels privy to a private conversation. Drawing upon her own lived experience and observations of her peers, she skillfully expressed women's newfound sense of independence, but without failing to capture their frequent faux pas. Their male counterparts were more plaything than patriarch, and her cartoons often

encouraged women to remain unmarried and childfree, occasionally hinting at queer undertones. She showed women expressing themselves, drinking, smoking, and flirting with a sense of invincibility.

"Yes, my wife's a fine woman—a very fine woman!"

January 7, 1928

The New Yorker

Ink and gouache on illustration board



"Oh, heavens! Boys my own age bore me
to tears."

October 22, 1927

The New Yorker

Ink and gouache on illustration board



"Yeah. I guess the best thing to do is to just get married and forget about love."

May 26, 1928

The New Yorker

Ink and gouache on illustration board



"I was just thinking, Freddie, what would
you ever do without me?"

ca. 1927

Publication unknown

Ink and gouache on illustration board



"I don't think he's abnormal—he's just versatile."

July 21, 1928

The New Yorker

Ink and gouache on illustration board



In the summer of 1928, New Yorker founder and editor Harold Ross wrote a letter to one of Shermund's cartoonist contemporaries, Gardner Rea, indicating that he wanted to include content in the magazine that would specifically appeal to queer readers. More than any other New Yorker cartoonist at the time, Shermund's work seemed to do this most frequently. Below are unpublished examples of additional Shermund cartoons with a queer subtext.

"Oh, never get married my dear — Not that I'd be any other way, of course."

ca. 1929

Unpublished

Ink on illustration board



TRAVEL

As evidenced by her heavily stamped passport, Shermund was one of the most well-travelled New Yorker cartoonists of the time, with visits to Germany, Spain, France, and Mexico. She had wanderlust and was happily untethered, much like the women in her cartoons. She used conversations she overheard across the world as her inspiration.

In Shermund's correspondence with editors, they frequently expressed frustration with her lack of a permanent address throughout the 1920s, 30s and 40s. For the few periods when she did have

a regular residence, she hardly spent time there, often submitting her work from hotels and friend's homes, both domestically and abroad.

"I guess I'll be much more valuable after this trip."

September 21, 1929

The New Yorker

Ink and gouache on illustration board



"You're better off in New York—Paris is full of Americans."

ca. 1930

Publication unknown

Ink and gouache on illustration board



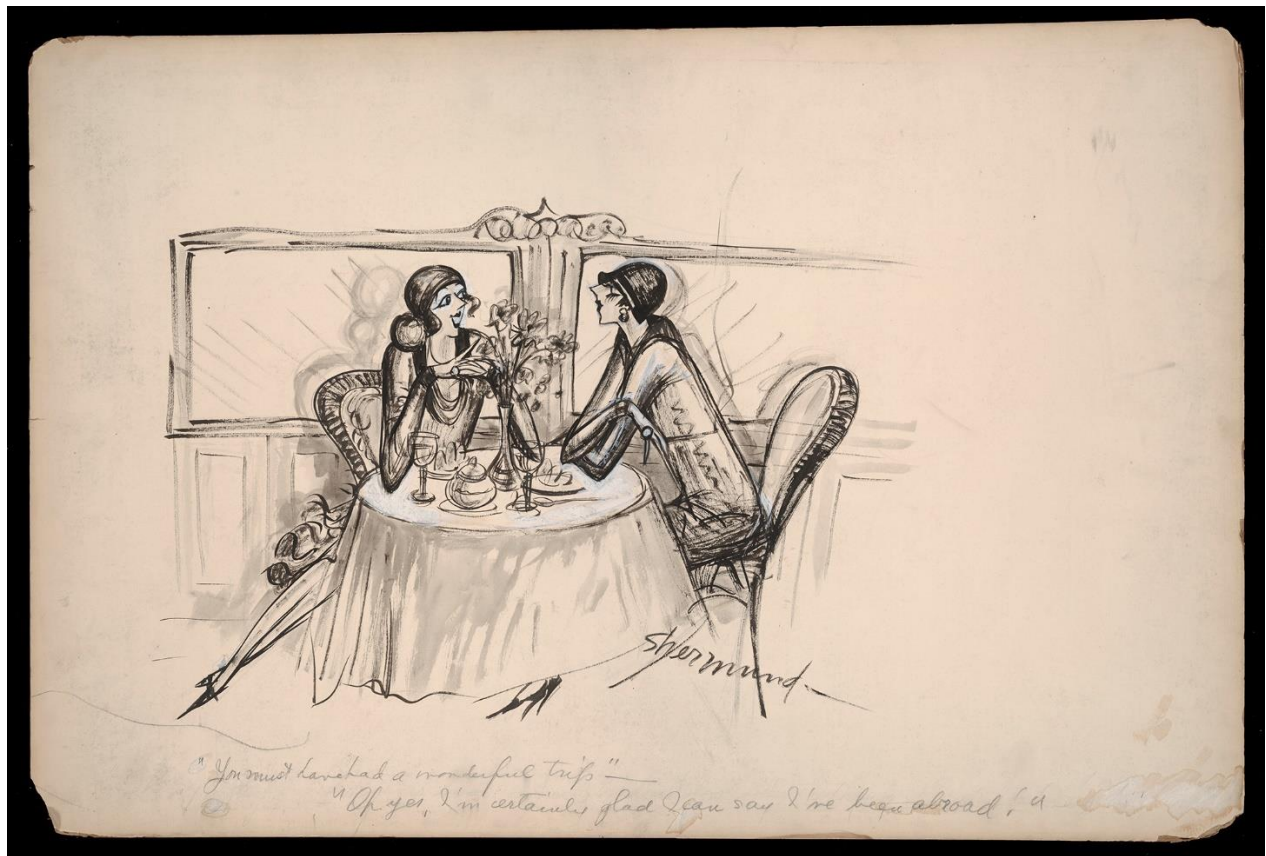
"You must have had a wonderful trip."

"Oh yes, I'm certainly glad I can say I've
been abroad!"

ca. 1929

Publication unknown

Ink and gouache on illustration board



SOCIETY

If someone took themselves—their troubles, their dreams, their tastes—too seriously, they made for the perfect subject of a Shermund cartoon. From elites to artists to intellectuals, she skewered everyone, especially those to whom *The New Yorker* catered. Crucially, however, she was able to do so in a way that made the reader feel in on the joke, even while recognizing a truth within it about themselves or their peers.

"Your architect must be a genius!"

"Oh, my dear, I gave him so many suggestions—he really only drew the plans."

October 10, 1927

The New Yorker

Ink and gouache on illustration board



"Don't worry, my dear, Poochie simply adores parties!"

ca. 1940

Publication unknown

Ink on paper



"Or do you think it would look better on
the piano?"

ca. 1940

Publication unknown

Ink on paper

Stern and DeScenza Family Collection



"Everybody's here, Henry!"

ca. 1930

Publication unknown

Ink and gouache on illustration board



FASHION AND BEAUTY

Perfume counters, beauty salons, and department stores were common settings for Shermund's cartoons. These environments allowed her to find a laugh in the stereotypically female rituals and expectations of the era. Shermund seemed to delight in drawing women's garments, and the slender, flowing fashions that were popular at that time harmonized well with her fluid drawing style.

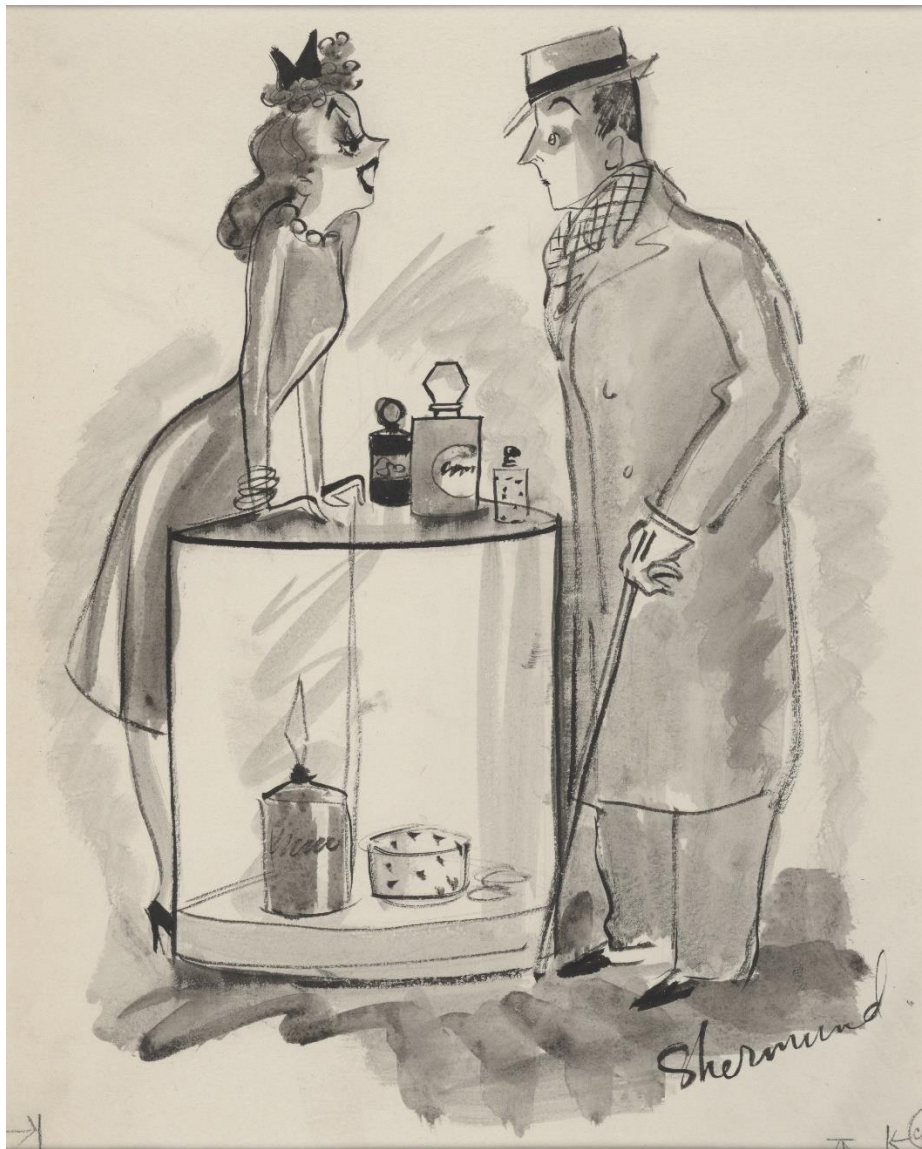
"Does she like to smell strange?"

March 2, 1940

The New Yorker

Ink on paper

Stern and DeScenza Family Collection



"Oh, wimmin — wimmin!"

April 7, 1931

Collier's

Ink on paper

Stern and DeScenza Family Collection



"Imagine!"

June 23, 1928

The New Yorker

Ink and gouache on illustration board

Stern and DeScenza Family Collection



"I want something—you know—just a weensie bit naughty."

ca. 1930s

Publication unknown

Ink and gouache on illustration board



"Let's see something in that nice shade of tan with the pinkish cast to it."

"Do you mean 'Ecstasy,' madame?"

February 25, 1928

The New Yorker

Ink and gouache on illustration board

Stern and DeScenza Family Collection



"Something darker and sheerer — You see
— I'm in mourning."

ca. 1930

Publication unknown

Ink and gouache on illustration board



ART WORLD

While contributing to *The New Yorker*, Shermund got to know many writers, poets, artists, and critics. The group of intellectuals known as the Algonquin Round Table was at its most active during Shermund's time at the magazine, and she likely ran in similar social circles.

Throughout her life, Shermund's work appeared in museums, including major solo exhibitions at the de Young Museum in San Francisco, and the Stendahl Galleries in Los Angeles.

"Send one out to my house and as soon as you find out the name of it, let me know."

July 12, 1930

The New Yorker

Ink and gouache on illustration board



"Of course it's a woman—they don't do
landscapes in marble."

October 29, 1939

The New Yorker

Ink on paper



“Yes. I’ve always been crazy over pictures!
Did you know I did china painting as a
girl?”

ca. 1925

Ink, charcoal, and gouache on illustration
board

Brandywine Museum of Art

Purchased with Museum funds, 1993



"You're an artist, Mr. Plinnes, and Mrs. Tompkin is the mother of a very artistic little girl — you should have a great deal to talk about."

February 16, 1929

The New Yorker

Ink and gouache on illustration board



"Now forget you're drawing for the
Tweedlebaum Tomato Soup Co. — Let
yourself go!"

ca. 1935

Publication unknown

Ink and gouache on illustration board



"It's either very good or very bad.

Everyone brings it right back the next day."

September 28, 1935

The New Yorker

Ink on paper

Stern and DeScenza Family Collection

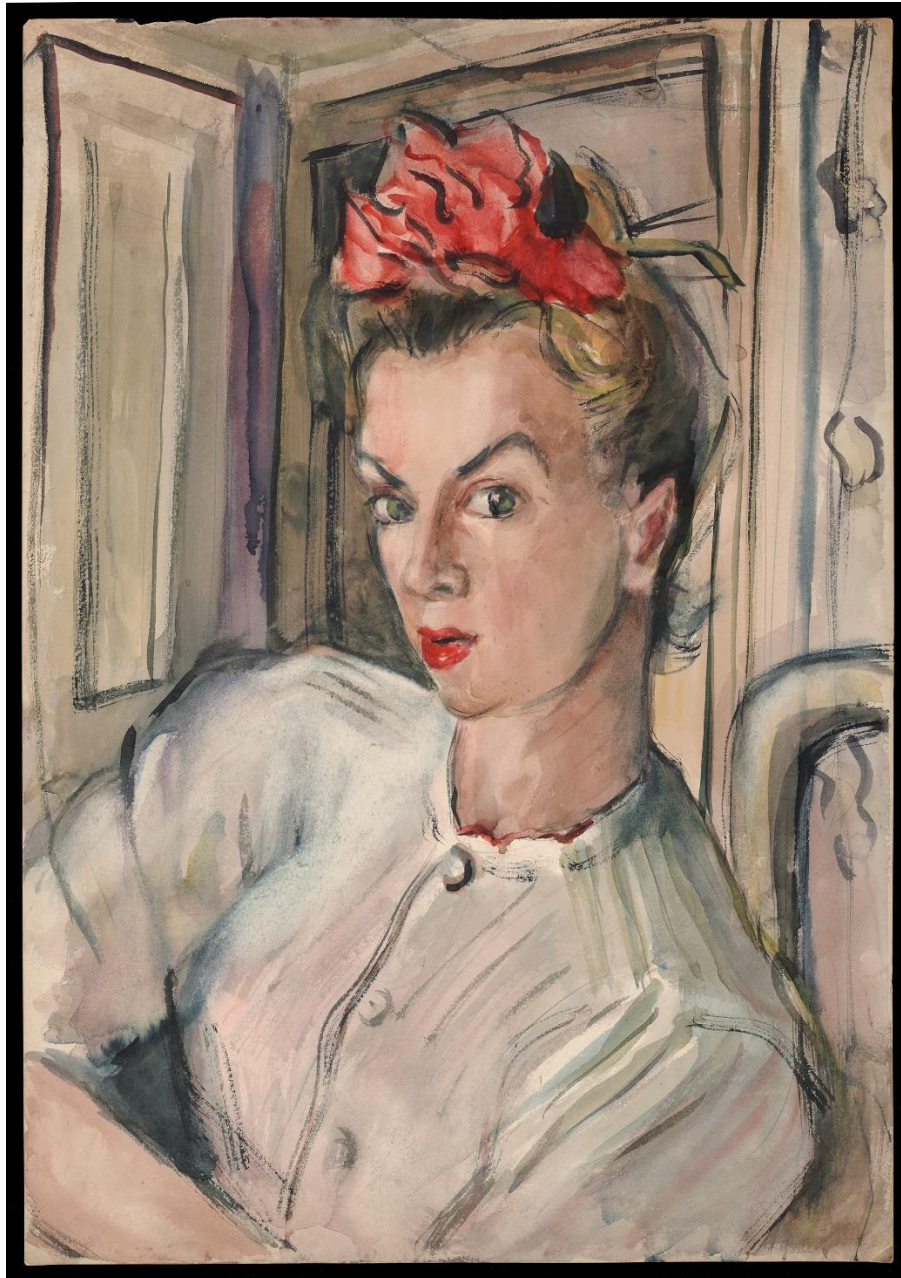


CASE

Self-portrait

ca. 1940s

Watercolor on paper



CASE – EARLY WORK

3/4 view woman leaning on hand

ca. 1925

Ink and gouache on illustration board



Smoking woman lounges in city apartment

July 18, 1931

The New Yorker

Ink and gouache on illustration board



Shermund's spot illustrations for The New Yorker, such as those shown here, appeared and repeated hundreds of times in the magazine throughout the publication's first few decades, typically accompanying an article, or nestled into the page layout.

Greetings from Barbara Shermund

ca. 1919

Etching on paper



Woman in profile

ca. 1918

Etching on paper



This early etching by Shermund is likely of her mother, Fredda Cool, who died in the 1918 influenza pandemic.

CASE – ILLUSTRATED BOOKS

Psychopathic Dog book illustration

1946

Ink on paper

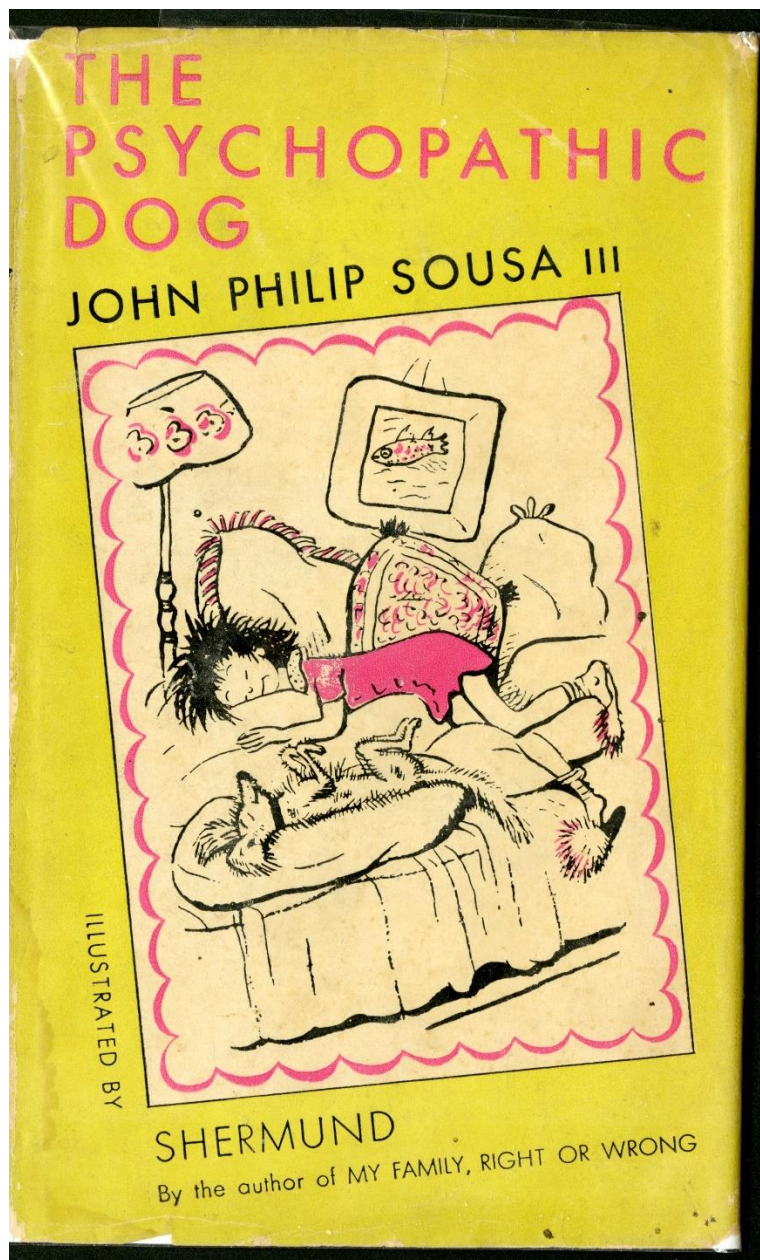


The Psychopathic Dog by John Philip Sousa

III, illustrations by Shermund

1946

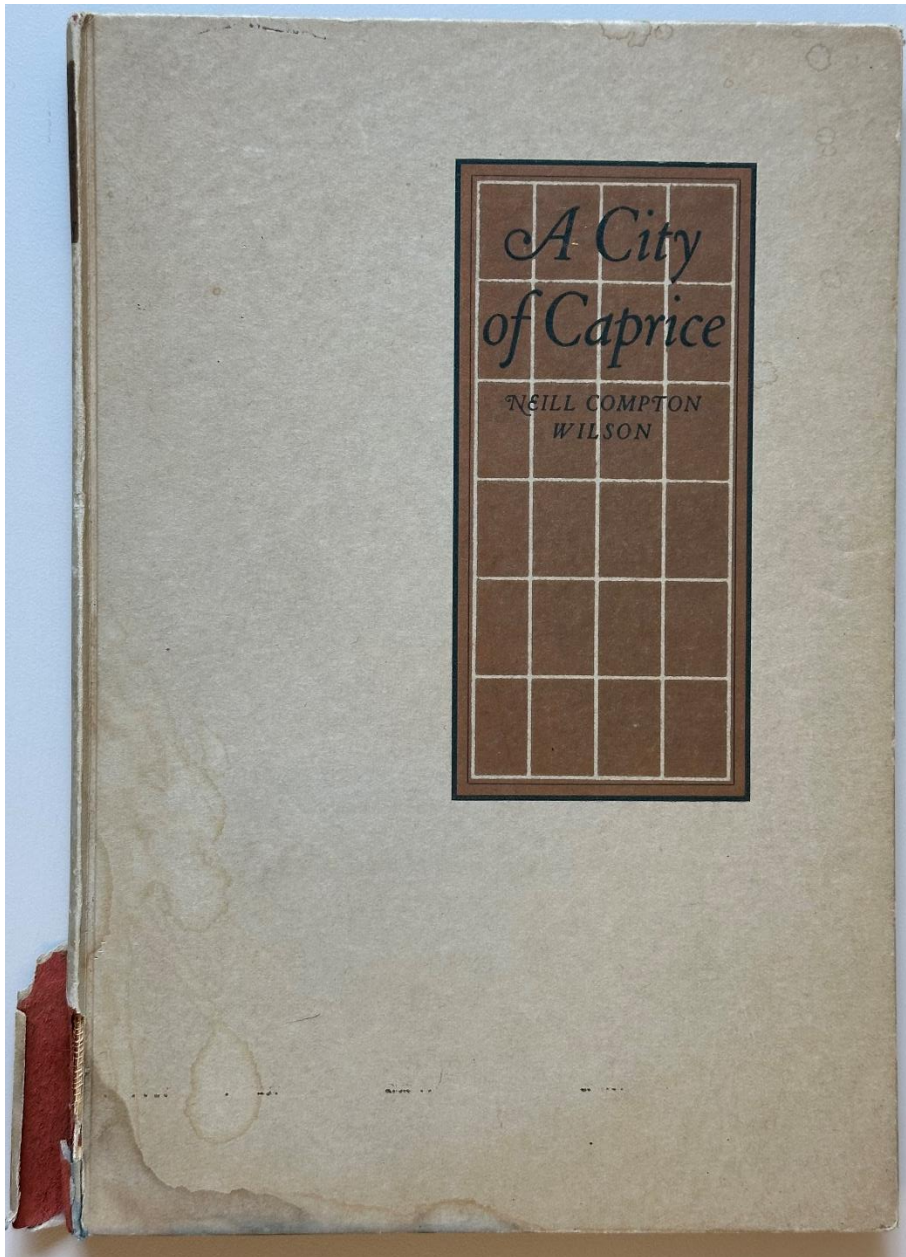
Doubleday



A City of Caprice by Neill Compton Wilson,
etchings by Shermund

1921

The Metropolitan Press

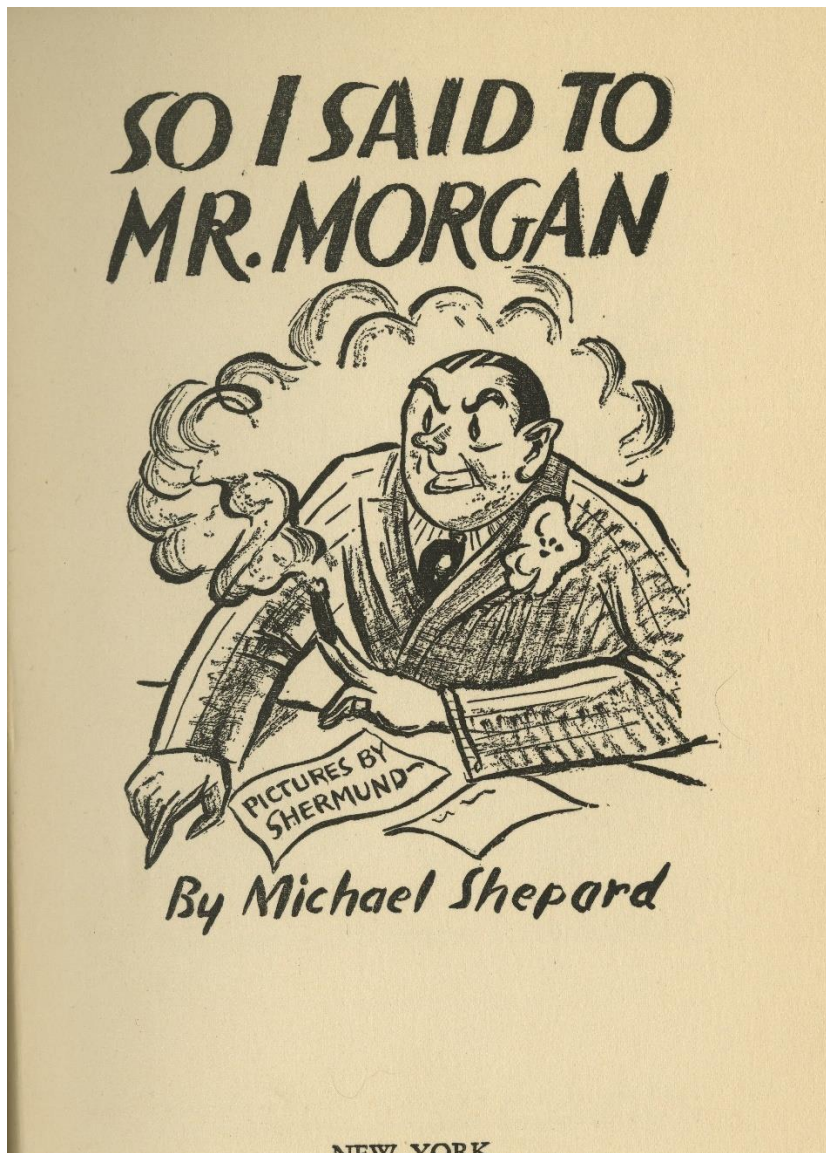




ETCHING BY BARBARA SHERMUND

*"And then to frets Sicilian
And gamuts Genoese
I'd strum."*

So I Said To Mr. Morgan by Michael
Shepard, illustrations by Barbara Shermund
1930
Greenberg



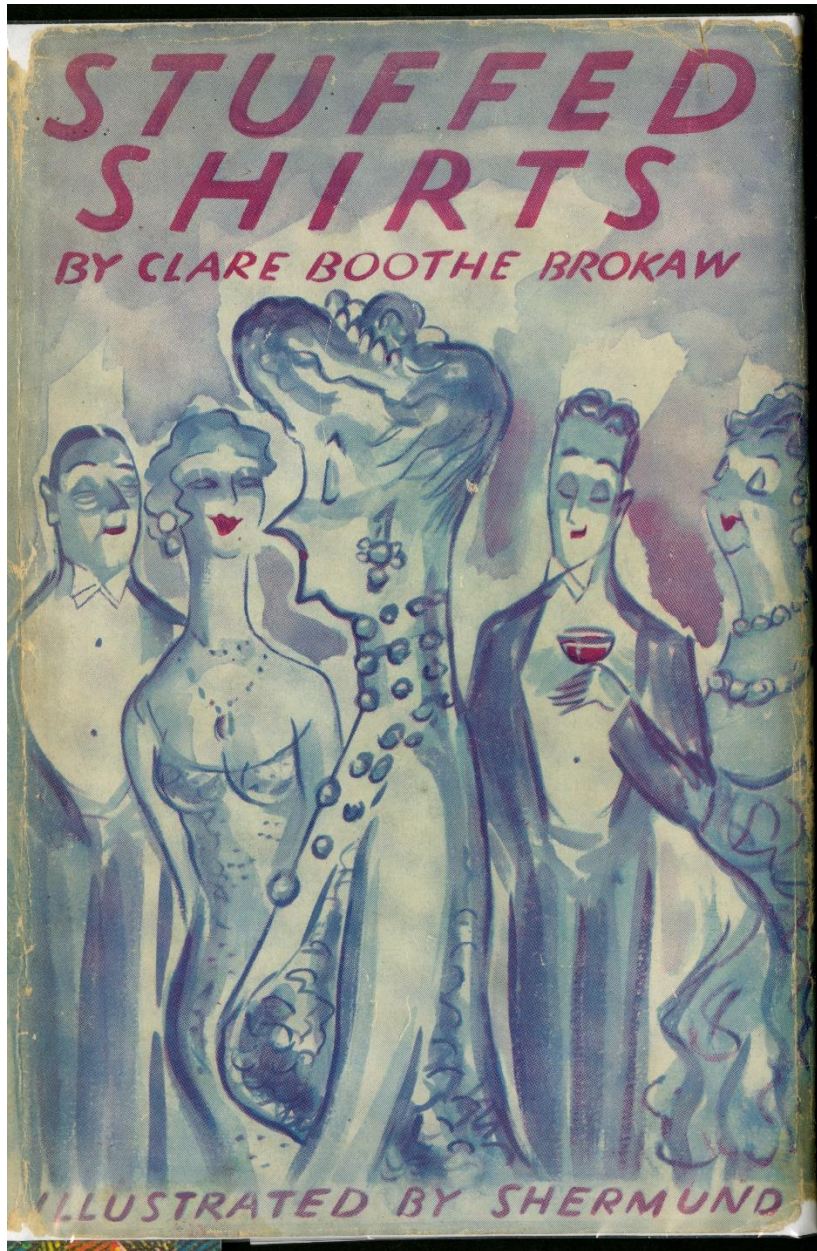
Although little information is known about their relationship, Michael Shepard and Barbara Shermund were briefly married and may have lived in France together between 1929–1931.

Stuffed Shirts by Clare Boothe Brokaw,

illustrations by Shermund

1930

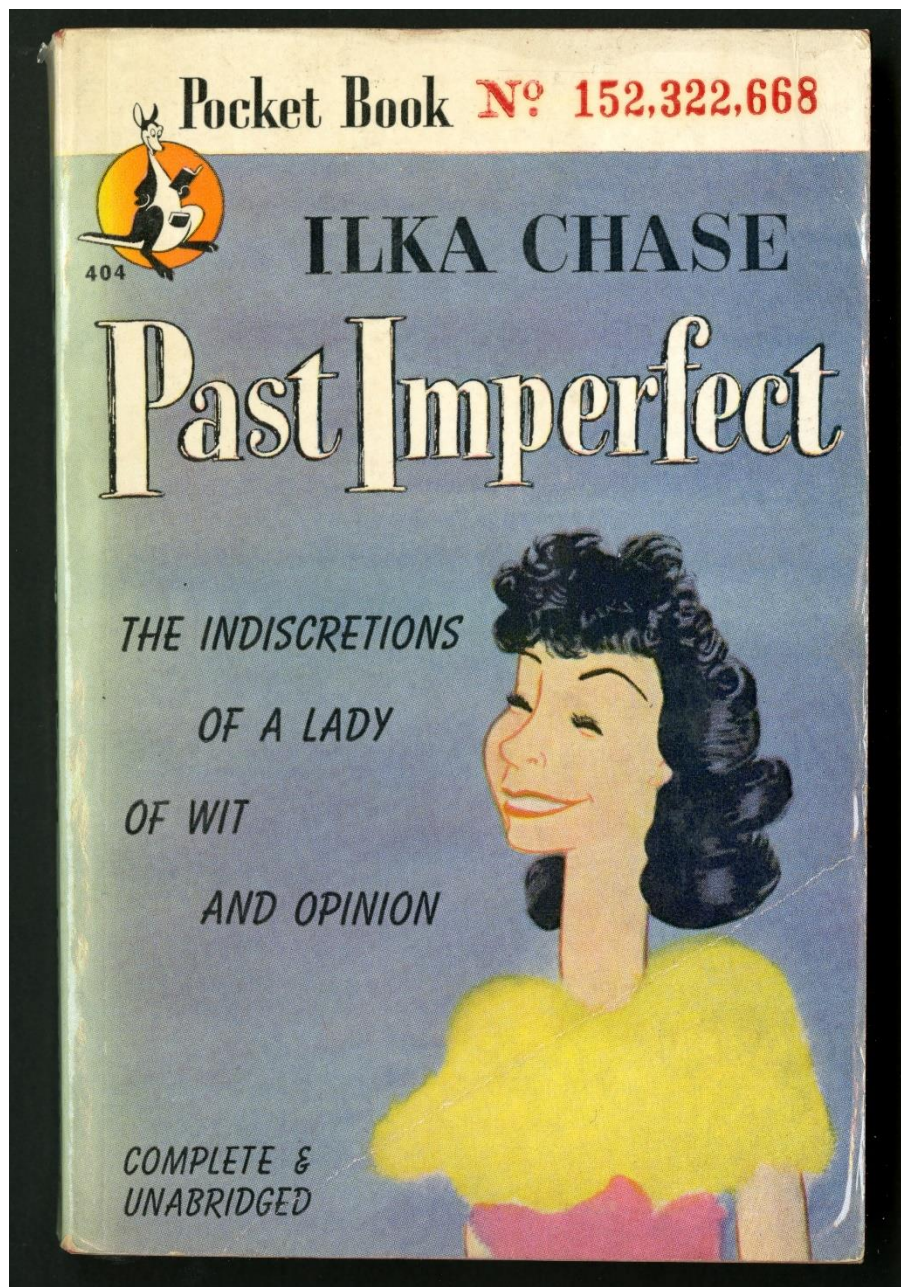
Horace Liveright



Past Imperfect by Ilka Chase, cover art by
Shermund

1942

Doubleday, Doran and Company



Portrait of Ilka Chase, draft for book and
record cover art

1942

Ink on paper

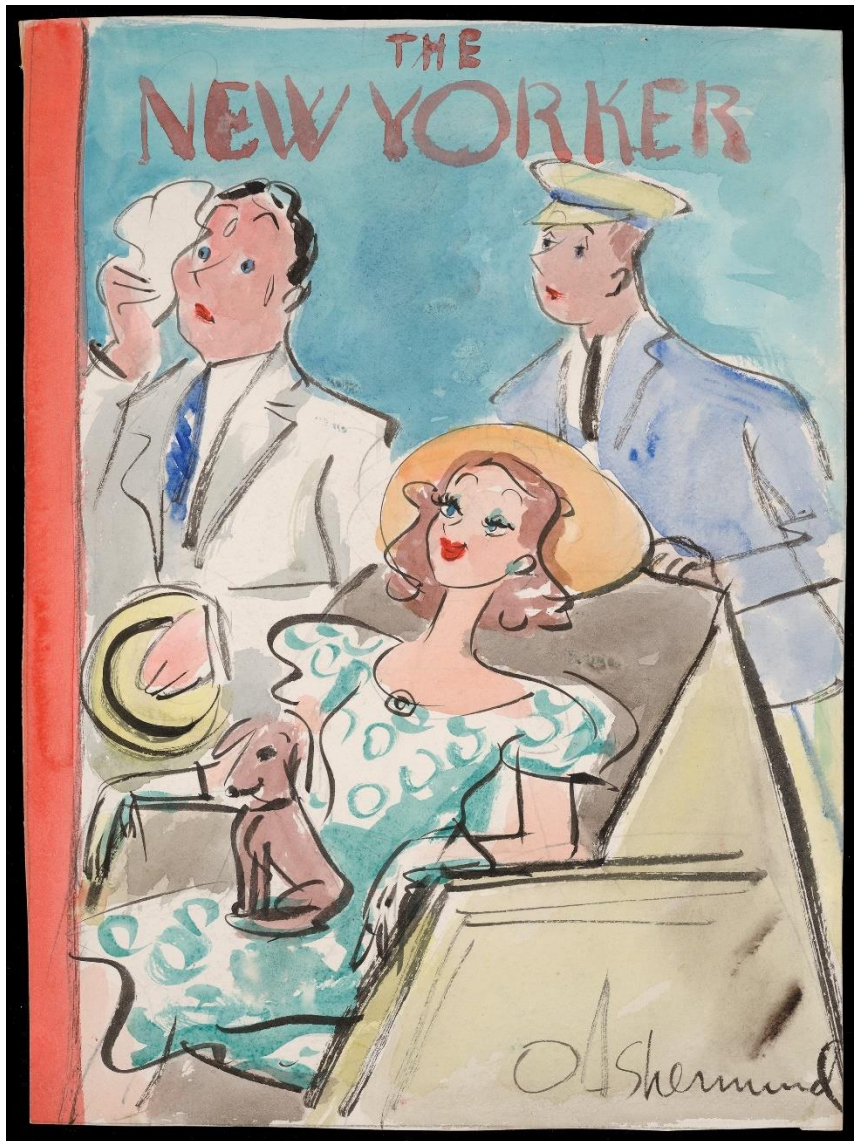


CASE – COVERS AND ROUGHS

Draft of unpublished cover art for The New Yorker

1930s

Watercolor and gouache on paper



Draft of unpublished cover art for The New Yorker

1940s

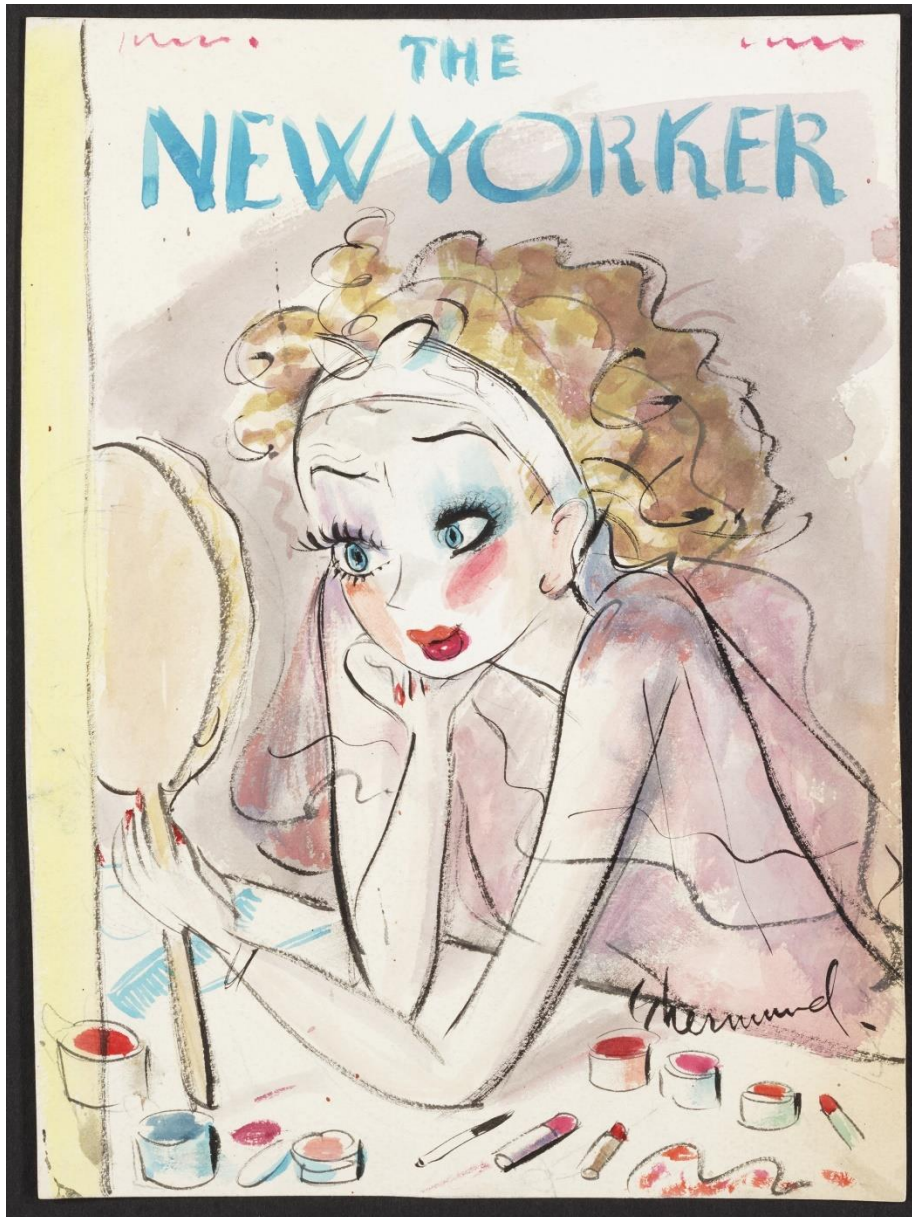
Watercolor and gouache on paper



Draft of published cover art for The New Yorker

March 18, 1939

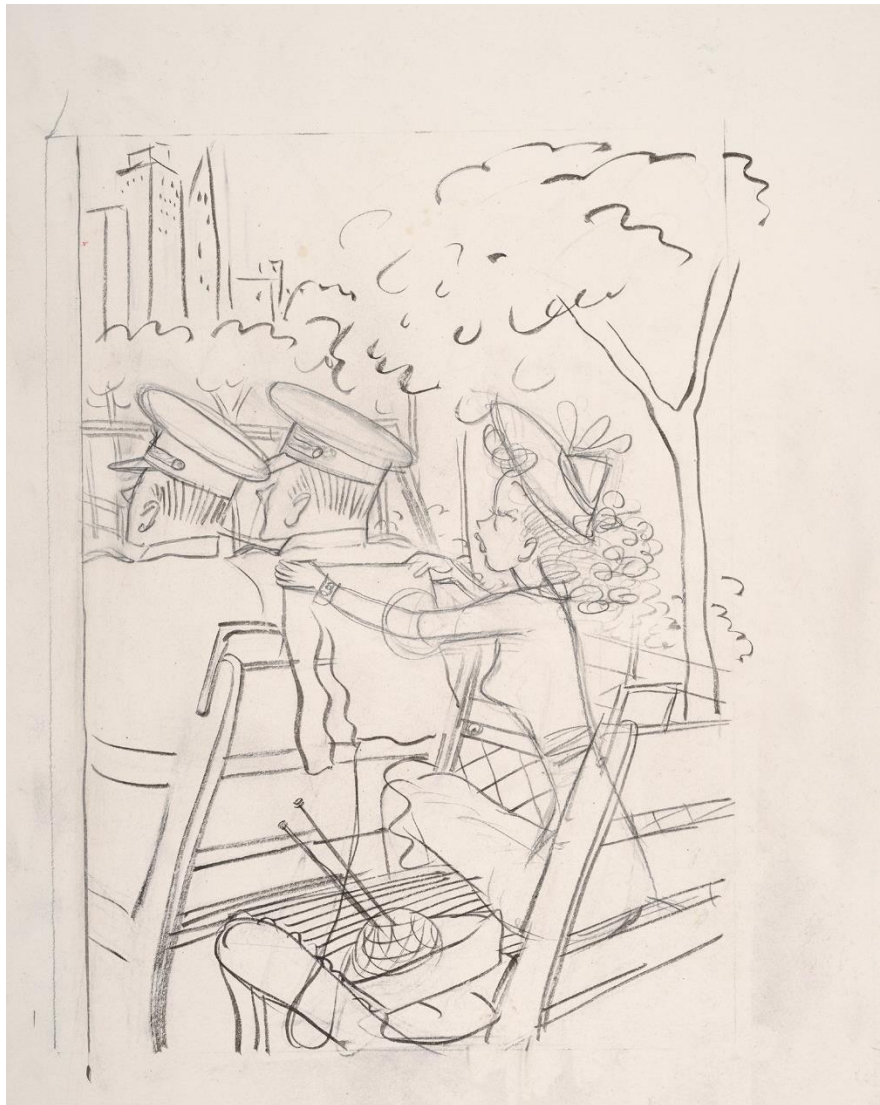
Watercolor and gouache on paper



Draft of unpublished cover art for The New Yorker

1940s

Watercolor and gouache on paper



CASE – PORTRAITS AND LANDSCAPES

Seascape with woman in blue bathing suit

ca. 1950s

Watercolor on paper

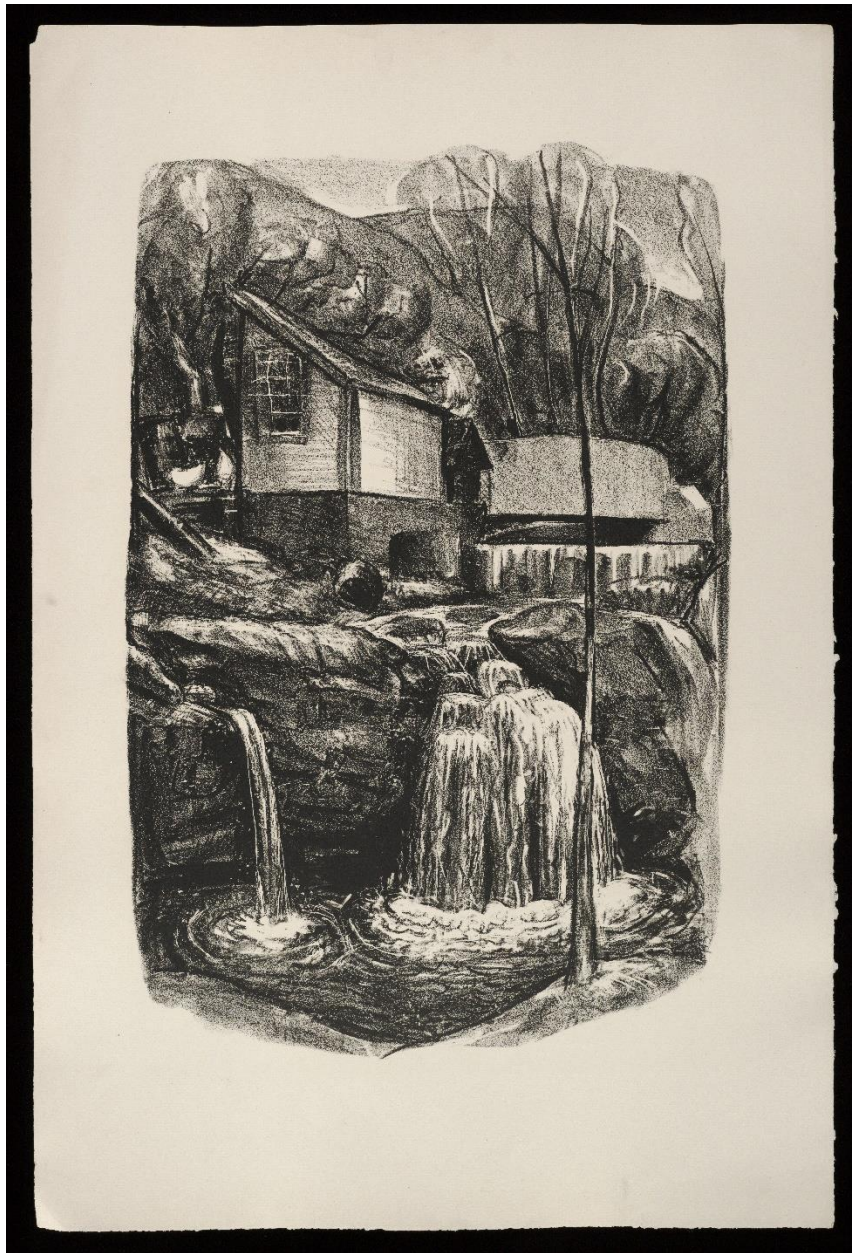


Tannery brook waterfall scene in

Woodstock, NY

1933

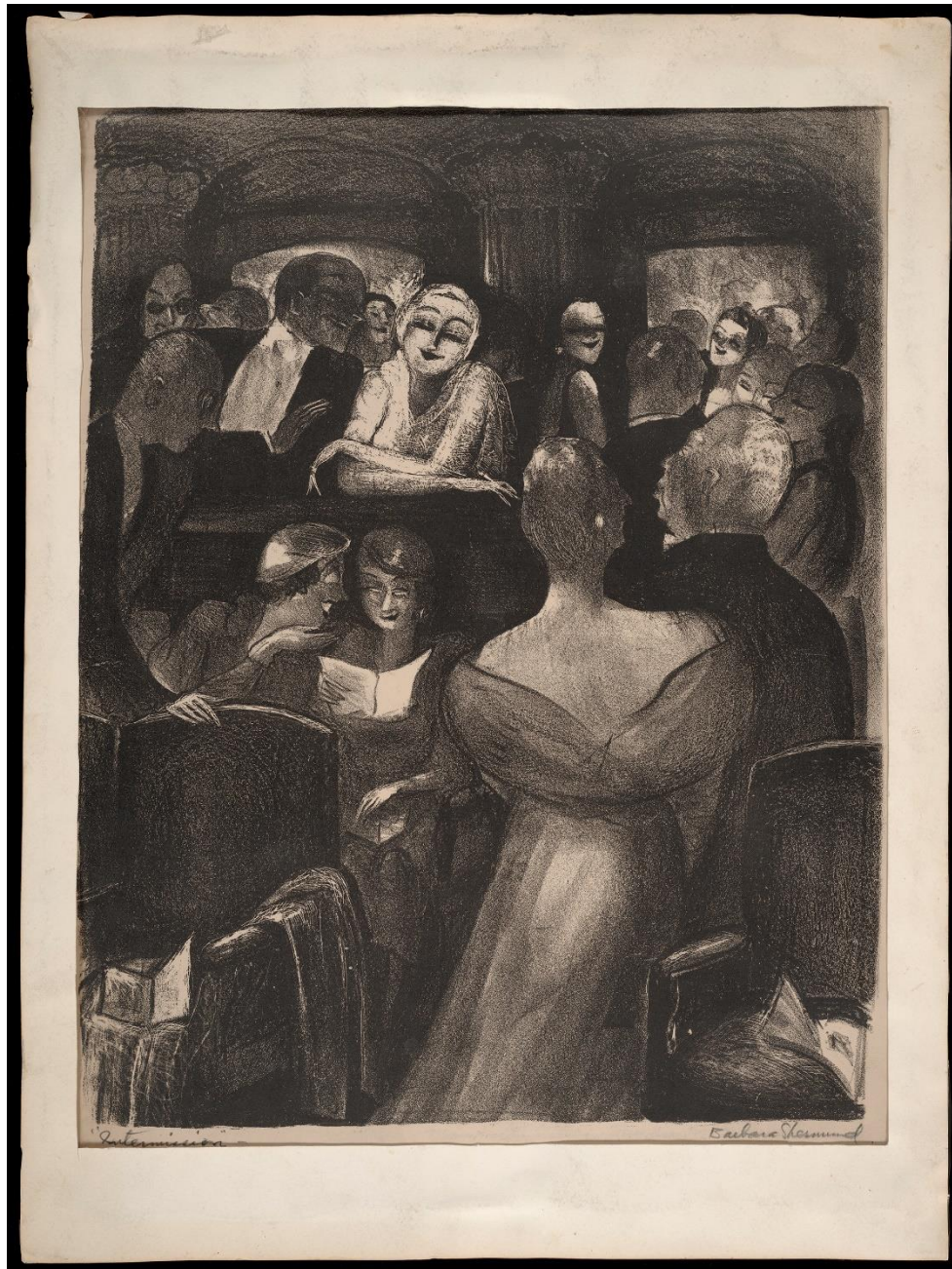
Lithograph on paper



Intermission

1933

Lithograph on paper



CASE – OBSERVATIONAL DRAWINGS

Sketches of spectators at racetrack

ca. 1930s

Ink and gouache on paper



Sketches of boxing match

ca. 1930s

Ink and gouache on paper



CASE – ADVERTISING WORK

"Vanity, nothing! Somebody dropped a bottle of Pepsi-Cola in the water."

Draft for Pepsi-Cola advertisement

1945

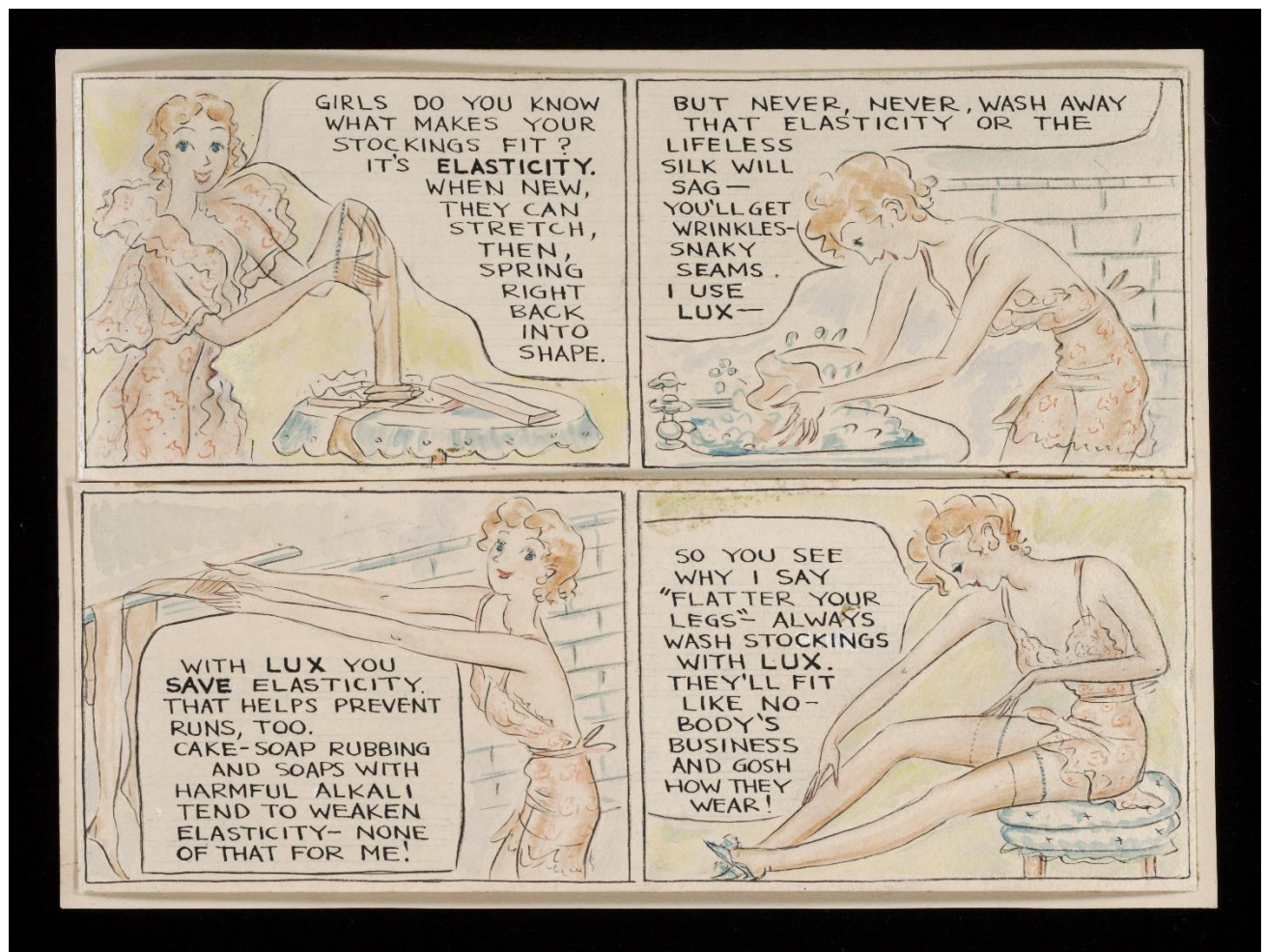
Ink on paper



Original art for Lux soap newspaper advertisement

1930s

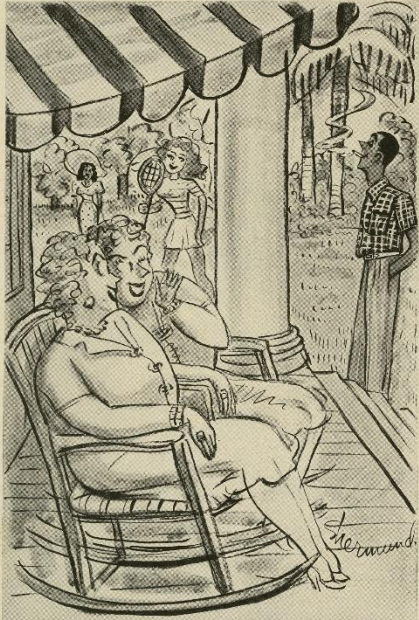
Ink, colored pencil and watercolor on paper



Wings Sportswear advertisement

1945

Magazine clipping



Wome

Winter
Martins

Utility c
It is mo

Winter w
skin coat

... and I hear he wears Wings Sport Shirts."
"That settles it. I'm wiring my daughter today
to come right up."

Mother's making the most of her vacation. However, the
gentleman is making the most of his appearance. He
knows there's a difference in Wings Sport Shirts... in the
way they fit. Wings contour-construction follows figure
proportions. For real comfort and smartness, ask for
perfect-fitting Wings Sportswear at your nearest dealer.

Wings Sport Shirts 1.25 to 7.50
Wings Ensembles 5.00 to 12.50

WINGS SPORTSWEAR
FOR PERFECT FIT

PIEDMONT SHIRT CO. Greenville, S. C. Empire State Building, New York

86

Ponds "Lips" advertisement

1944

Magazine clipping



LAUGHING Stock

BY ERSKINE JOHNSON

Tune in "Erskine Johnson in Hollywood"
Mutual Broadcasting System: 4 p.m. EST;
3 p.m. CST; 2 p.m. MST; 11:15 p.m. PST

LANA TURNER visited the M-G-M lot between pictures wearing a flimsy playsuit. The studio censor, Al Block, saw her and later told the wardrobe department: "Lana can't wear that."
"Don't be ridiculous," replied the wardrobe department. "That isn't a costume for a movie. It's her own playsuit and she just went shopping in Beverly Hills."

Hollywood continues to marvel at the successful marriage of Bill Powell and Diana Lewis because of the big age span. I remember when they were first married. Bill was talking to a pal in his den when there was a loud crash in the direction of the living room. The friend looked startled but Bill said:

"It's nothing to worry about. Just Diana sliding down the bannister."

Sign in a Hollywood jewelry shop: "We mend everything except love affairs."

Maria Montez was watching the rushes of a love scene between her husband, Jean Pierre Aumont, and a glamour doll. "How do you feel when you see your husband kissing another woman?" she was asked.

"Oh, I don't worry a bit," replied Maria. "I figure he does the same thing I do—concentrate on showing a good profile to the camera."

Not in the script: "My only frightening experience in Hollywood was seeing myself on the screen. I look just like I look."
—Henry Morgan.

A much married movie queen introduced her daughter to her fourth stepfather. The little girl smiled and said: "Won't you please write something in my guest book?"

Al Jolson gave everybody connected with his radio show a smoked turkey. The writers of the show, Mannie Manheim and Charles Isaacs, were convinced Jolson raised the turkeys himself—because they were smoked in a kneeling position.

Samuel Goldwyn's new musical, "A Song Is Born," features the nation's top bandleaders. One day a number of them, including Goodman, Dorsey, Barnet and Basie, were having a jam session. Goldwyn, visiting the set, stood and listened quietly. Songwriter Sid Robin watched for a while and finally came over to him and said: "Look, Mr. Goldwyn, for all the money you're paying these boys, at least you could tap your foot!"



She's got him in a dither with DITHER!

Pond's "Lips" stay on...



New! Pinker! Sweeter! —that's DITHER!

and on...

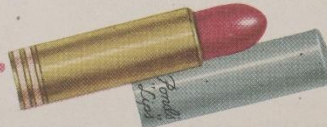


DITHER "LIPS" are New Look "LIPS"!

and ON!

POND'S "LIPS"

Dither



The new-pink Pond's "Lips" shade that's perfect for Spring! Handsome swivel case — 49¢, 25¢

Original art for Pond's LIPS magazine
advertisement

1944

Ink on paper



CASE – LATER WORK

"Have you anything that's slightly repellent?"

April 16, 1950

Shermund's Sallies for King Features

Watercolor and ink on paper

Stern and DeScenza Family Collection



"Turkey again?!"

November 23, 1958

Shermund's Sallies for King Features

Watercolor and ink on paper



Man with black eye painting woman

ca. 1950s

Shermund's Sallies for King Features

Watercolor, ink and pencil on paper



"I think there's something tragic about you going through life alone with just your vast fortune!"

October 24, 1954

Shermund's Sallies for King Features

Watercolor and gouache on paper



"Don't bother to introduce us—we'll just mill around!"

February 25, 1955

Shermund's Sallies for King Features

Watercolor and gouache on paper



"Let's follow these!"

November 7, 1948

Pictorial Review

Newspaper clipping



"...and when the wind was howling outside and the rain was coming down, I'd curl up in bed, pull the comforter over my head and be with you in that foxhole."

September, 1945

Esquire

Watercolor, gouache and ink on paper



"Don't sigh with relief yet—I'm not finished!"

December, 1954

Esquire

Watercolor and gouache on paper



"Of course, it isn't really fair to the nightie."

ca. 1950s

Shermund's Sallies for King Features

Watercolor and ink on paper

Stern and DeScenza Family Collection



"Now tell me a story where the bad little girl wins out!"

ca. 1950

Shermund's Sallies for King Features

Watercolor, gouache and ink on paper



"Now tell me a story where the bad
little girl wins out".