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Aesthetics, Androgyny, and Identity: Charmian Kittredge London’s Artful Life

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“Quite young, she decided that what she calls her pseudo talents were not the end and aim of her, but gifts to be used in the art of living” (Oregon Journal). By early adulthood, Charmian Kittredge decided that she was very good, although not exceptional, as an artist. She played piano, sketched, wrote, and photographed, and included horseback riding as an art form. Rather than give up these practices, she folded them into a larger vision of life, one guided by aesthetic choices. At the same time she understood herself distinct from the typical woman of her day, that her beliefs and behaviors crossed the bounds of acceptable femininity.

Early in their love affair, Jack London described to Charmian his longtime dream for a “great Man-Comrade,” who honored both flesh and spirit, who was both “practical in the mechanics of life” and “sentimental where the thrill of life is concerned.” Such a person would be “delicate and tender, brave and game” and willing to face pain without fear. He would face life frankly, perhaps sin greatly, yet would forgive greatly as well. Concluding this intimate letter he exclaimed at the wonder of discovering this vision of kinship in “the great woman-love as well,” that being Charmian. This admission led to their vision of a relationship based on equal sharing, respect, and honesty, as “Mates” (C. London, Book II: 82).

London implied androgyny, a fusing of masculine and feminine traits. His idea may have come from extensive readings in philosophy and mythology. Another source, then prominent in East Bay philosophical discussions, was Swedenborgian thought, which referred to the Universal Androgyne, a perfect merging of the sexes. Yet the early twentieth century retained the notion of gendered separate spheres. Men enjoyed all-male settings and dominance in public life, while women attended to the home. Despite suffragist groups and women’s clubs, notions of domestic femininity dominated. London’s first wife, Bess Maddern, was adventurous when he met her, an avid bicyclist with her own business as a math tutor. After the marriage, she submerged her independence in home and motherhood. Thus, London’s confession to
Charmian proposed an eccentric ideal, one she found complimentary. Most of her middle-class female peers would not.

To fulfill London’s dream, Charmian must have exhibited behaviors and beliefs to express the fusion he found so appealing. Her self-presentation resembled what was later referred to as the New Woman, one who sought autonomy over her life and rejected the restrictions of chastity and domesticity. That icon supported suffrage, and her choices led to broader demands for education, work, free sexual expression, and more. The New Woman represented a major cultural shift that would bloom during the flapper era of the 1920s.

London knew of such women before meeting Charmian. The heroine of his first novel, *Daughter of the Snows*, is Frona Welse. Stanford-educated, she shocks male onlookers by befriending Indian women and prostitutes in the Yukon. In addition to being intellectual, she brags about how she can swing clubs, fence, swim, do high dives, and walk on her hands. Book reviewers attacked the story for portraying such an unrealistic heroine. Nevertheless, they did exist in California, scattered within the nascent middle class and university settings. In the 1890s they rode bicycles, hiked mountains, and spoke on platforms alongside men. They were a definite minority, albeit a visible one. Novelist Gertrude Atherton’s novels featured such women, although eastern readers found them obscene or immoral for being so independent.

If Jack viewed Charmian in primarily gendered terms, she conceived herself otherwise. In the process of breaking conventional expectations, she chose her path in the world as experiencing and expressing the beautiful and sublime. Central would be the senses, attention to the body as the medium for feeling and creating. Aesthetics refers to a theory of what is artistic or pleasing, and these criteria are grounded in history and culture. So the origins of Charmian’s autonomy—scholarly labels aside—and the expression of her artful life must be seen within Bay area intellectual history.

The androgynous woman is deviant for refusing to stay within feminine bounds. She threatens the patriarchal order by succeeding in masculine pursuits. How a woman dresses is significant because, as Shu-Chuan Yan explains in her study of Victorian dress, “the cultural myth of women is one caught up in an interconnected series of metaphors concerning femininity and sexuality” (752). This is how the dress reform movement of the nineteenth century connects to women’s rights: conventional dress had become a signifier of willing subordination. The Bloomerites failed to advance the cause, yet left open the discourse regarding self-presentation and power. As will be evident, Charmian’s dress choices managed to balance femininity with a challenge against female subordination.

Charmian Kittredge London’s androgyny blended with both aesthetic and political movements prominent in the San Francisco Bay Area. Had she not...
married Jack London, she would remain noted in local history for her striking nonconformity. In marrying London, she served his fiction to propagate his ideal of androgyny to the national culture and thus contribute to ongoing discussions while the suffrage movement heated up. By examining her life, both interior and public, one can see how she came to androgyny as well as exploited it for her personal use. Ultimately we see how she developed a self-identity that straddled both subversion and public approval.

The Londons as a couple left behind extensive writings, letters, and photographs, and Charmian kept regular diaries. As public figures, they welcomed journalists to publicize their ideas and projects. These direct traces of their attitudes and practices provide a rich lode for the scholar of their marriage. Historical reconstruction of Charmian’s life prior to meeting Jack is more difficult. When Irving Stone researched his biographical novel Jack London, Sailor on Horseback (1938), Charmian granted him access to everything apart from her youthful papers and diaries. When she discovered later he had violated her trust, she destroyed that material. Stone’s remaining research notes from the diaries are scant and refer only to the suitors and lovers of her twenties. Fortunately, I found sufficient information in newspapers, family history, and local history to weave a credible narrative of her formative years.

In addition to my decades of research notes on Charmian London (Stasz), for this essay I explored several new sources, in particular newspaper databases and the phenomenal digital library of photographs in the Jack London collection at the Huntington Library. There thousands of images document the friends, interests, activities, and travels of the couple. The State Park District Office in Petaluma also provided access to fashion historian JoAnn Stabb’s eight-volume analysis of Charmian’s clothing in their holdings. Docents from the Jack London State Historic Park showed me a new clothing exhibit and refreshed my memory of the Londons’ activities there on the Beauty Ranch.

Charmian’s identity developed during her early years and adolescence as the ward of her Aunt Netta and Uncle Roscoe Eames. The accompanying essay in this issue by Iris Dunkle and Susan Nuernberg develops this history in detail. My emphasis in this essay is on how this household’s particular beliefs, constraints, and tutelage partly shaped her distinctive “androgynous aestheticism.” Ultimately, one understands her socially liberated, California-bred identity through her choices in costume and décor. It is particularly telling that the Oakland Tribune Yearbook for 1921 pictured Charmian London on its cover (Figure 1) as “The Spirit of California” Personified: on horseback, head tilted back, clad in jodhpurs and riding astride, she emerges from an Arts and Crafts-style redwood gate in the background and gallops toward the viewer.
Despite its size and significance, the state of California lacks an integrated history of women. The sole survey, by Jensen and Lothrop, is forty years old. Scholarly journals provide snatches of history, often focused on a class, ethnicity, or location. General histories of the San Francisco Bay area tend to feature outsized female characters, such as Lola Montez, Isadora Duncan, or Gertrude Stein, as indeed do Jensen and Lothrop. Until now Charmian Kittredge London has largely been absent from that

Figure 1. Charmian Kittredge London as the “Spirit of California.” Source: Oakland Tribune Yearbook, 1921.
history, perhaps because her creative achievements have traditionally been overshadowed by the career of her celebrated husband. The essays in this issue are part of a more recent effort to explore the significance of Charmian’s contributions to the artistic and literary life of California in the twentieth century.

**Roots of subversion**

Growing up without siblings or playmates, Charmian retreated to develop a rich imaginative life where she could embed herself in historical events. She wrote of reveries, called Beatitudes, which planted her firmly in the past. Rather than rebel, she was anxious and obeyed without question. Charmian’s strong-willed aunt called her “Old Woman” or “Childie,” stunting her self-confidence. “Quiet house where I was seldom disturbed at work or play or study, or reading as omnivorous as I was supposed to be able to absorb and classify. MUST BE ALONE where many persons are concerned” (C. London, *Charmette* n.p.). She came to fear unpleasantness with others, so learned to feign agreement. In an early portrait she avoids looking at the camera and seems uncomfortable in her homemade homespun gown (see Figure 2). Despite her introversion she created a sociable persona to see her through public situations, a pretense she used throughout her life.

In addition to home-schooling Charmian and teaching her piano, Netta encouraged unconventional adherence to vegetarianism, women’s suffrage,

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**Figure 2.** Charmian, about age twelve, in a homemade gown characteristic of Arts and Crafts. Source: Author copy.
natural healing, and Socialism. Charmian adopted all except spiritualism. When moved to attend a church service she went to the liberal Congregational Church. Netta also pushed the girl toward more masculine pursuits. From her childhood life in a cabin in Wisconsin, she knew how to hunt, fish, and forage wild plants. Netta was happiest in nature, and taught Charmian these wilderness skills. San Francisco Bay offered sailing, while the nearby hills welcomed horseback riding and hiking, all pursuits Charmian adopted. By adolescence she demonstrated unusual strength and coordination for a girl just above five feet tall. This combination of natural athletic ability and nonconforming beliefs melded into her androgyny. The former spurred her to physical achievement, while the latter to protest conservative beliefs. Despite her eccentricity, Netta maintained a household based on refinement and manners. She understood how niceties and proper dress aided in the spread of unconventional ideas. When not drawing criticism for her daring high dives at the public pool, young Charmian dressed in a way that did not set her apart.

At sixteen, she entered Mills Seminary, supporting her way as private secretary to President Susan Mills. This was a day when most youth ended their education with grammar school. “You were queer if you went to college,” noted a Berkeley female student in 1898 (qtd. in Jensen and Lothrop 51). She chose a non-degree program to study the arts, and left at age eighteen with a strong ethic based on self-discipline and organization. Her later diaries noted hours spent at work or miles walked, as though to grade herself. She found a secretarial job in San Francisco, and this in itself was unusual, because convention held offices to be unsuitable for women, who made up less than fifteen percent of that workforce. Work bolstered her self-confidence and earned her enough to buy and stable a horse.

She entered what she later called her “Belle” period: frequent socializing at university events or at faculty households. With her quick laugh, lyrical voice, and informed conversation, she became one of the most popular women of her set. Her brown hair glimmered with blond highlights while her dark eyes sparkled with gold. She was an excellent dancer who never lacked for a partner. For such public events she wore typical Belle Époque fashion: clothes that exaggerated the female figure through heavy corseting to emphasize a tiny waist. The chest jutted above in a large monobosom while fabric folds created full rounded hips. Charmian’s figure matured to become voluptuous, with no need of extra bosom stuffing, and the prevailing fashion accentuated this shapeliness. Ball gowns layered fabrics with extra frou-frous, partly to remind viewers of the expense. Although some women adapted the style to tailored suits with skirts, many viewers disapproved of them for hinting of masculinity and employment (Figure 3).

At the shipping firm where she worked she wore a style popularized in Gibson Girl drawings, a puffed-shoulder shirt with small tie above a gored
skirt. Charles Dana Gibson illustrated his fictional women at tennis and golf, thus representing the New Woman who refused to be restricted from outdoor pursuits. Charmian experimented to create appropriate clothing for her favorite pursuit, horseback riding cross saddle. In photographs she tests a split skirt that was “equally comfortable, and off the saddle look[ed] just like any other skirt,” she wrote in Out West (29). Being among the first women to ride astride and unchaperoned in the East Bay hills drew shouts of criticism from onlookers. Even women joining the bicycle craze received rebuke. Physicians cautioned “that even moderately vigorous riding could lead to gout, tuberculosis, lunacy, epilepsy, neurosis, and even cancer” (Strange 613), as well as contribute to their becoming manly, indelicate, and charmless.

Changes during the 1890s crystallized Charmian’s life goals. Through Netta, who was now a published writer and freelance editor, Charmian

Figure 3. Charmian c.1890s in a Belle Époque suit. Despite the corseting to exaggerate the feminine silhouette, such suits were thought too masculine. Source: Author copy.
discovered the particulars of a professional writer’s life, with its required research, marketing, and editing skills. Netta’s writing was Nature-centered, her prose displaying an eye for detail that invited the reader to experience the hot sun, the breezes, the scents, the whirring of insects, the stones beneath one’s feet. Charmian developed a similar sense-oriented style, an attention to detail that so engaged readers of her later travel books. In addition, while assisting Netta, Charmian learned photography and darkroom procedures. She focused her camera on landscapes and clouds (Figure 4), sometimes incorporating a soft-focus technique popularized then by such local artists as Anne Brigman.

The Eames household was an emotional powder keg. Netta subscribed to Victoria Woodhull’s belief that women deserved autonomy over their sexuality. Her husband Roscoe agreed, so both brought their lovers to the house as commonplace. Netta raised Charmian to be frank and open in sexual matters, to view sexuality as a healthy creative urge. Charmian fully accepted the precepts. Jack later incorporated Netta’s teachings in the character of Mercedes Higgins in his novel *The Valley of the Moon*. Bragging over her hold on men, Higgins reveals the trick is “Variety! Without it in a wife, the man is a Turk; with it, he is her slave, and faithful. A wife must be many wives.... Never let the last veil be drawn.... Each veil must seem the only one between you and your hungry lover who will have nothing less than all of

Figure 4. Yosemite Valley, 1890, photographed by Charmian Kittredge. Source: Huntington Library.
you” (J. London, Valley bk 2, ch 3). The young listener leaves frightened by these thoughts suggestive of lawless and immoral behavior. Charmian was not frightened. Following her first kiss, she concluded, “The result was too spiritual—the heightened brightness of everything to the MIND” (Charmette n.p.). She decided that passion and sex were creative urges that were not immoral unless used for wrong purposes. Familiarized with birth control, then illegal, she felt fully in control of her unusual choice.

Consequently, Charmian broke moral expectations by allowing her many suitors to touch her apart from dancing to tease their further attendance. Her diaries reflect one playing men for their admiration and the pleasure of their fondling. Her sensuality further expressed itself in collecting reproductions of female nude classical statuary. More telling is a scrapbook she compiled. She mounted reproductions of erotic paintings and photographs of nudes in an album labeled “A Dream of Fair Women.” One of the images appears to be of Charmian posing in her bedroom, long hair draping down her nude back. Who, one wonders, was the photographer?

Netta had a serious lover, the married Congregational minister Edward Byron Payne. He upset conservative locals with his emphasis on social welfare, a view seen as corrupting religion with politics. Despite its later reputation as progressive, even radical, Berkeley during Charmian’s day was more conservative than other towns in the Bay area. It soon voted itself dry, and even forbade serving alcohol in the home. Yet while Netta and Payne were atypical residents, they found associates among artists, Socialists, and professors.

In late 1894 Payne formed a utopian community, Altruria, in Santa Rosa. Charmian visited and photographed the commune, while Netta prepared an article about it. When Altruria quickly failed, Payne left the pulpit to devote his life to philosophy and lecturing. While young Jack London expounded on Socialism through street corner speeches in Oakland, Payne lectured in formal settings on his mission to integrate various spiritual and political ideas, against prohibition, for social welfare causes, and for “Living as an Art.” Much admired throughout the Bay area, he earned respect from key thinkers and artists who visited the Eames household.

Payne’s wife died in Sacramento in 1898, but he may have already moved into the Eames’ Parker Street house before then. Roscoe Eames remained there too. At one point Payne was editor of the Overland Monthly, while Eames was business manager, and Netta assisted both. This editorial ménage was the basis for Jack London’s first meeting with Charmian. When they met, she was five years older and directed upon a career of her own. She told the 1900 Federal Census taker her occupation was “writer magazines.” After contributing anonymous reviews and commentaries to the Overland Monthly, her name now appeared there for the first time over her account of a blind piano player.
The Eames-Payne ménage created an environment where unconventionality ruled. These were well-educated, strong-minded people open to the latest ideas in every field. However exceptional Charmian was, however popular, Netta was unhappy with her ward, who collected marriage proposals yet never marched to the altar. The mention of “loves” in Charmian’s diary along with their photos marks her achievement in controlling them. She was self-aware, acknowledging she lured them in exchange for balls, plays, and fine dinners. Off and on she pursued a sexual relationship with a wealthy married man and saw him after he divorced his wife. Netta wanted them to marry, and even pressured the man, but Charmian demurred.

Netta also argued with her ward over money. In the 1890s Charmian inherited sizeable legacies upon the deaths of her father and an uncle. She invested in real estate, buying several houses in Berkeley for rental income. She could also afford a wardrobe more suited to her life as a Berkeley socialite. Netta believed Charmian owed her financially for raising her. Eliza Shepard, who knew Netta for decades, described her as “someone who would cheat her own mother,” adding that “the yarns she told about Charmian were outrageous” (E. Shepard to Irving Stone, Stone Papers Sept 2, n.y.). Indeed, she would badger Charmian for money over the next six decades.

Approaching thirty and desiring full independence, Charmian fled to her father’s relatives in New Hampshire and Maine. To fund this trip she sold a house for $1500, equal to three years of an average worker’s wages. In New Hampshire, she met a politician who courted her and stayed all night after a ball, yet even he did not earn her loyalty. In 1901 she traveled to East Coast cities and then through Europe, absorbing as much art and music as possible. Self-sufficient, self-determined, and multi-talented, Charmian returned to California at age 31 and moved in with the family of her uncle, lawyer Harley Wiley. Within several years she would be joining her life with writer Jack London, the two melding their artistic visions.

Aesthetic movements and influences

Both Charmian Kittredge and Jack London came of age as the Arts and Crafts Movement swayed Californians’ aesthetic choices. It originated in Britain under the influence of art critic John Ruskin and craftsman William Morris. Ruskin argued against the demoralizing effects of factory production upon its workers and urged a return to well-designed objects created through individual workmanship. Essential elements were utility and simplicity. William Morris revived forgotten techniques and applied them to decorative arts such as pottery, embroidery, wallpapers, and furniture construction, with stylized flora and fauna as popular motifs. Mixed in were hints of the Gothic and Medieval as well. The adherents’ aesthetic beliefs
overlapped their progressive goals of social amelioration; thus those with a more liberal political stance found these ideas worth shaping their lives around. The Bay area proved a most receptive medium. (See, especially, Trapp and Bowman for a thorough presentation of the movement in California.)

Key was connecting utility and beauty as a counter to the Victorian abundance extolled in Clarence Cook’s best-selling *The House Beautiful* (1878). Invoking the same title in 1895, William Gannett wrote of the pleasure of “a place where the people really live” as against using decoration for show (21). The ideal of beauty was “simple, restful things . . . the least ornate” (29). Even President Theodore Roosevelt urged the values represented in *The Simple Life* (1904), where authors Wagner and Hendee turned the aesthetic into a moral cause by aligning it with a modest domestic style that rejected the degrading influences of striving for “sumptuous living” (192): “The height of art is to make the inert alive and to tame the savage” (200). Giving thought to one’s dress, home, and decor thus was not frivolous, but essential to a good life, he averred. These books spawned lecturers, magazines, and pamphlets, all furthering the cause.

The artful life further encompassed self-improvement and ongoing adult education. Summer camps offered lectures, workshops, and entertainment for every member of the family. Originally based on church gatherings, the camps developed a secular version. Formalized as the Chautauqua movement, its speakers addressed political themes, such as women’s suffrage and child labor, along with spiritual topics. Jack London lectured on Socialism at Camp Reverie, a similar retreat, when vacationing there with his family in 1901.

Charmian’s youthful homes exposed her to Craftsman ideals. The Oakland house was a bungalow, a style admired for its functionality, while the Berkeley house reflected an aesthetic still visible in that city today. In the 1890s architect Bernard Maybeck introduced housing designs that incorporated abstract Gothic elements into wooden structures that evolved into the Bay Area bungalow and shingle house. The blurring of public and private spaces responded to the temperate Bay area climate. Balconies, loggias, and sleeping porches were common elements. Through native trees and shrubs, gardens offered a naturalistic flow throughout the neighborhood. Streets followed geological form rather than repeated the grid system of the flatlands. This new aesthetic pleased land speculators and developers, who welcomed the movement to spur Berkeley residential expansion around the young University of California.

Significant too is that Charmian lived in a neighborhood of aesthetic activists, most of whom belonged to the Hillside Club. Started by the wives of Maybeck and writer Charles Keeler, it grew to include university leaders, artists, and progressive politicians. Its mission was to protect Berkeley slopes
from unsuitable white boxes in favor of the style still prominent in the area today. Charmian was of the small social class comprising this group. Keeler had taught Sunday school at the Unitarian Church when Payne was minister (Herny et al. 36). That Keeler dedicated an 1898 poetry book to Payne hints further at Charmian’s connection with these influential townspeople (James 253). Through that society, she became further accustomed to the bourgeois social niceties of entertaining that she was to put to use during her life with London. These people also had servants, as did the Eames household, so that middle-class women managed, rather than executed, daily chores. (This was true throughout the country until the First World War.)

The new style of house required an appropriate decor. Craft workshops emerged to create tiles, linens, pottery, furniture, sculpture, and art glass appropriate to the style. Bay area artisans developed common motifs from the landscape, such as the gingko leaf or California wild poppy. They preferred colors from the landscape: muted greens, golds, and browns. For fabrics, anything homespun ruled, with modest embroidery to add to the artfulness. An accomplished seamstress, Charmian made some of her clothing, including her underwear. She embroidered items or added bits of her own crochet and tatted lace.

Given California’s place on the Pacific Rim, a related aesthetic influence was the Far East. Its leading Bay area proponent was Keeler, who found many Asian crafts and styles worth emulation. Thanks to the clement weather local residents were often outdoors. Keeler thought the Japanese approach offered standards for outdoor spaces supportive of reflection and work. For decor, Keeler praised the natural materials used in the Japanese aesthetic for useful ornaments. He recommended the styles of Chinese and Japanese potters as well as their use of festive lanterns. This view led to incorporating the handcrafts of other indigenous cultures, such as Native American baskets and woven rugs.

All these influences shaped Charmian’s bedroom decor. Perhaps through a hunt with her friend Grace Hudson, an artist who painted portraits of local Pomo Native Americans, she acquired coyote pelts, which she placed on her floor and daybed. She constructed pillows with batik and printed fabrics for the bed. She kept her library and desk there as well, placing her key private activities in one location. An artful life was a busy one, which for Charmian meant daily piano practice, sketching, reading, and writing, when she was not out sailing on the San Francisco Bay or riding her horse.

However advanced its design philosophy, the Arts and Crafts aesthetic retained the old gendered formula. Women remained responsible for the home environment, although the philosophy urged designs that promoted efficiency to reduce a homemaker’s labor. Women were said to have alchemical qualities, an ability to transform daily activity into something good for the soul. They put “witchery into a ribbon and genius into a stew” (Robertson 148). By using native materials and homespun cloth and by
planning modest meals, they also exemplified American ideals of patriotism and frugality.

The actual design of the furnishings and decorative objects, however, emphasized masculinity. A woman might have some light carved pieces in her space, as Charmian did in her boudoir, but sturdy, rustic furniture dominated the parlor. The oak Morris chair and heavy Mission pieces extolled the hearty outdoor male, the Teddy Roosevelt man who had virtually vanished from the landscape. Despite the containment of the woman in the home, the aesthetic, “understood as convenience and economy in decoration as well as finances, was an androgynous goal” (Robertson 345). It suggested an extension of office efficiency into the household, such that husband and wife agreed on key values.

Agrarianism appealed to the East Bay aesthetes, who emphasized the soul-uplifting value of nature. When Charmian left for Maine, Netta built an octagonal brown shingled home in Glen Ellen, California, naming it Wake Robin. She and Payne created a Chautauqua-like experience for visitors who could camp in tents or live in the lodge while attending classes, lectures, and entertainments. It was there London took his family for the fateful summer of 1903. Returning to Oakland for some items, he injured his leg in a carriage accident. Hearing Charmian was on her way to Berkeley, Jack’s wife Bessie asked Charmian to look in on him. Soon after, an affair ensued and Jack deserted his family, taking up residence in an apartment.

Given his celebrity, Jack urged Charmian in 1904 to leave the Bay area. Netta encouraged the romance and invited Charmian to move to Wake Robin Lodge.

Figure 5. Jack and Charmian London by Wake Robin Lodge, built by Netta Eames. Source: Author copy.
Robin so the two could meet there far away from knowing eyes (Figure 5). During his visits there, London completed *The Sea-Wolf*, while Charmian became his assistant as typist and editor. From the beginning he paid her with his handwritten manuscripts, a property that became quite valuable. In return, she introduced him to the benefits of life on the land, surrounded by nature. She taught him to ride, and led him on daylong trips in the Valley of the Moon, encircled by mountains. Following a journalism assignment to cover the Russo-Japanese War, he moved in permanently with her. He also brought a valet, and later added other servants to free them both from everyday chores. She determined there the commonplace would never dampen their ardor.

**Clothes and identity**

Charmian’s commitment to the Arts and Crafts aesthetic was most visible in her wardrobe. *The Craftsman* magazine argued, “It is of no use to build houses of the kind that reduce labor, and make dresses of the kind that use up all the hours we have saved in our wise architecture” (qtd. in Robertson 364). Women’s clothing could contribute to a better way of life by adapting to the needs of the body during specific activities. Advocates argued that elaborate fasteners, meaningless drapery, and excessive ornamentation interfered with and disguised the “temple” of the human figure.

Simple washable cottons and subtle colors of from nature became the basis for Charmian’s daily dress. (The “house dresses” that women wore until late in the twentieth century derive from this style.) Touches of simple embroidery added unique decoration. Charmian shifted her wardrobe to these dresses or cotton blouses with gored skirts. She needed clothes that moved well in the house and out on the ranch. For formal wear, she designed a high-waisted rust velvet gown with gold lame trim in the manner of British Pre-Raphaelites. Another gown of peach pongee draped like a sarong. Between these two extremes were other Asian-influenced articles such as kimonos, genuine and bespoke, perhaps encouraged by Jack, who had been to Japan and appreciated the aesthetic of the Far East. Completing that style, she wore *zori* (thong sandals) with *tabi* (split-toe socks). Even her eveningwear was utilitarian, unrestricted at a time when hobble skirts were becoming fashionable. Most of her clothes were of her design and sewn by local seamstresses (see Figure 6).

These coverings also freed the body for sexuality. For more freedom of movement, Charmian changed her underwear to loose breast covers and muslin pantalets. With the under-armor gone, more of the body revealed itself. Running throughout London’s writings to and about his wife is the theme of her sensuality. Following their first sexual rendezvous, he wrote his admiration for her lack of prudishness. In an unpublished note titled “Her
Body,” he praised “the bowl of her—it’s very exquisiteness defeating passion except in its best (purest, grandest) manifestation.” As that parenthetical comment implies, London’s prior sexual relationships were rushed or with prostitutes. He overcame his working-class view of a sexually responsive woman as unworthy for marriage. Charmian noted their lovemaking in her diaries, even her “solo lollies.” “An orgy of love on embroidered rug on the floor. ‘Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?’ Jack says” (Diary 23 July 1908).

In 1905 the couple went cross-country, marrying in Chicago, continuing on while Jack gave Socialist speeches in the Northeast. During their honeymoon to Jamaica and Cuba, Charmian photographed alongside him and began the eventual massive archive devoted to her husband’s life. While they traveled, Netta handled Jack’s business matters. In that role she secretly used some of his royalties to add an Annex to Wolf Robin for the couple’s private home and then charged the couple rent when they returned. They were too busy for several years to notice the ploy. They purchased an old

\[\textbf{Figure 6.} \text{Charmian in a blue and silver uncorseted gown, c. 1910. She probably bought the lace during her travels. Source: Author copy.}\]
farm on Sonoma Mountain and spent afternoons at ranch work. They had to see to their horses, cows, and chickens. Cleared land became a hay field and a small vegetable patch worked by a neighbor. Redwoods, oaks, and madrone provided forest for hunting, and the creek swimming hole relieved hot summer days.

The Londons interrupted their ranch life to spend 1907–1909 crossing the Pacific on the Snark, a dream trip cut short by Jack’s illnesses. Once again Charmian designed special pantsuits for the occasion of sturdy muslin for protection from the elements. These exposed her lower legs at a time women’s ankles still required coverage (shown in Figure 7). On shore or in

Figure 7. Charmian in the Solomon Islands in her self-designed muslin adventure outfit. Note the Colt pistol on her hip. Source: Author copy.
towns during their excursions she wore linen suits with gored skirts and loosely bosomed jackets requiring no corsetry. Aware that they would meet elites and local dignitaries such as Hawaiian sugar barons and South Pacific kings, she included a flounced white gown for fancy affairs.

When it came to ornamentation, Charmian shifted her focus to accessories, many of her own design. For sailing and swimming, she devised turbans to control her waist-long hair, and she sought hats while traveling, whether simple straws or plush velvet, or the Baden-Powell she adopted for the tropics. She created purses from fabrics or skins and crocheted bags and collars as well. Though she seldom wore jewelry, she preferred the subtlety of opals and collected them, as well as Polynesian pearls and tortoise-shell ornaments, during their travels. Her preferred jewelry was a pearl necklace, likely a gift from Jack, for it appears in many portraits.

On the other hand, Jack’s utilitarian notion of a wardrobe was twelve identical white silk shirts made to order in Yokohama, along with a few pairs of shoes and unironed, comfortable pants. Charmian loved a complete look to the point where she had toppers for each outfit and slippers to accompany each robe or nightgown. Her body was her canvas, and Jack admired her self-adornment, the feminine expression of a body capable of extreme physical adventures. To some viewers her costumes seemed too showy. Others wondered how she could be so feminine, yet also ride, shoot, and box more daringly than anyone else.

Home as identity

In 1910, newly divorced, Netta married Edgar Payne, rented out Wake Robin, and moved to Oakland. That year Charmian became pregnant, which led to plans for a proper house for their growing family. Preferring alternative treatments to conventional medicine, Charmian planned upon a midwife and a natural delivery. Others convinced her to spend her last weeks in Oakland so she could deliver at a hospital. The full-grown baby girl died hours after the doctor broke her back during delivery. He overlooked the complication that the placenta did not fully expel, so Charmian, too, almost died and took months to recuperate. She mourned this loss over the years through her diary, in references to “Joy’s birthday” or other imaginings. (Her next pregnancy, in 1912, would result in the miscarriage of a boy.) Yet the tragedies did not dampen the couple’s plans for a home of their own design.

A rare reference to aesthetics in Jack London’s writing is “The House Beautiful,” its thesis that utility and beauty should be one (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 35). Published in 1906, the essay most likely reflects Charmian’s influence given its explicit assertion of Arts and Crafts ideals. Indeed, London’s spacious 1902 study while he was married to Bess Maddern
suggests little concern with artful display. He tacked notes and images on the wall higgledy piggle (Haughey and Kale Johnson 23). He had little exposure to fine arts during his youth. Having moved twenty-two times before his second marriage, he had little reason to see a home as more than a place to sleep and eat.

In September 1911, the Londons left Wake Robin to live on the ranch in a drafty old bungalow infested with wood rats and lacking modern conveniences. Among Jack’s first improvements was a modern bathroom with a skylight, his second “library.” They converted an adjoining winery building into guest rooms, stables, and living space for workers. A narrow stone building became a dining/living area, with kitchen and laundry. Charmian hung Korean bells outside and retrieved her classical sculptures from storage, along with other items from her youthful rooms.

By now, the ranch served multiple functions. There were fields of forage plants for the animals, gardens of vegetables and fruit for meals, and copses of eucalyptus for future sale. Jack’s divorced stepsister, Eliza Shepard, had moved to the ranch with her son Irving to become ranch superintendent. Highly intelligent and wise in organizational matters, she proved exceptional in that role. (She later became National President of the Women’s Auxiliary of the American Legion.) She and Charmian were close as well, so the three adults were a powerful and compatible team running the many London projects.

A lifelong animal lover, Charmian was most devoted to animal husbandry. They raised cattle, Jersey cows, angora goats, and Duroc pigs for breed, not for butchery. She joined Jack in consulting with Luther Burbank about ranch plantings and used his spineless cactus for cattle feed. While Jack studied scientific bulletins, he acknowledged Charmian’s more intuitive eye. She could examine the conformation of an animal and predict its characteristics for breeding. At the annual State Fair their entries won first prizes to prove their accomplishments. Her greatest interest was the horses, the massive Shires for farm work and the thoroughbred riders.

Despite their writing and ranch work, which had no Sabbath rest, they countered with hours of enjoyment later in the day. Guests around the table could include neighbors, old Bay area friends, ex-prisoners, and other writers. Artists appeared as well, notably actors, musicians, and singers on tours stopping in San Francisco. In this way the Londons provided respite to other busy, creative people. A pond up the mountain became a swimming spot where they had dinner served outside. They organized games, such as bobbing for apples from a flour barrel or soap bubble competitions, and led the willing on long horseback rides.

In the Dining Annex guests listened to Charmian play Chopin on her Steinway amid artifacts and Arts and Crafts decor. The couple displayed exotic items collected on their travels. South Pacific calabashes became
lighting fixtures (see Figure 8). Carved totems and Pomo basketry provided the “primitive” element that was now a key feature in modern art. Unbleached curtains and soft brown painted walls denoted simplicity. The Mission furniture and handmade Korean chests represented artisanship. Sculptor Finn Froelich created two large frieze tiles with scenes from the life of King Arthur. Here guests gathered for cocktails and conversation, the dining table hidden behind a large tapa-cloth screen until meals were served.

Fond of long-staying guests, the Londons embarked on the building of their most ambitious project, Wolf House. Charmian described it “not as a mansion, but as a big cabin, a lofty lodge, a hospitable tepee, where he, simple and generous, despite all his baffling intricacy, could stretch himself out” (C. London Book II 265). Although Charmian certainly had input on its design, it was principally Jack’s project. He hired Arts-and-Crafts architect Albert Farr to create a building constructed with products found on the ranch, including redwoods, chocolate-maroon volcanic rock, and enormous boulders. The floor plan emphasized utility. It was a home for those who lived in it, the appreciation of others being secondary. Jack ensured every modern convenience, from a vacuum cleaning system to steam dryer, along with root cellar and milk storeroom. Meanwhile they ordered handcrafted furniture, such as a Mission-style round table and chairs of Oregon myrtle wood.

On 22 August 1913, the day before the move to the home, it burned to the ground, leaving only a massive stone shell. “Everything reminds us of our
loss. We lay aside notes & samples, etc. & feel as if the bottom of our plans had fallen out” (Diary 25 August 1913). Their strong intimacy bound them closer. Jack took her to a dance hall, where he “makes love to me in a little ‘box’ while we watch the sorry game of man and woman played out on the dance floor below” (Diary 18 September 1913).

Despite the unimaginable reality, they worked through the grief. They continued with ranch building, a concrete silo and piggery. They expanded their farm cottage, with a large addition for Jack’s den and an alcove to expand Charmian’s bedroom, which served also as their intimate space. Jack slept on a small glassed-in porch where he read late into the night from his bed. Charmian’s larger sleeping porch served as her den for writing her own books. When assisting Jack, she used a typing desk in the new den. The contrast between the two porches affirms her concern for beauty over his for utility. Her porch (Figure 9) looked over the lush planting surrounding the large circular carp pond. Coyote furs, favorite sculptures, art reproductions, native baskets, and fresh flowers surrounded her when she did her own writing.

The tragedy brought financial as well as emotional loss. They plunged their hopes into a variety of problematic adventures, including cinema and stage rights to Jack’s work. Charmian completed The Log of the Snark, which appeared in 1915. The book recounts the most adventurous parts of their voyage through the colonized South Sea Islands to the Solomon Islands with their copra plantations worked by enslaved Melanesians. Her word paintings reveal the colors and weather of life on the boat, of sunsets, and of an active

Figure 9. Charmian in kimono pajama set on her sleeping porch, decked with coyote furs, ship photos, wicker furniture, and flowers. Source: Author copy.
volcano. These sense data weave together the couple’s adventures on horseback or foot. Descriptions of food preparation, boat handling, and tapa cloth making inform the reader with the clarity of a movie camera. At a time when the South Seas were a popular topic in the States, she offered a rich travelogue. Throughout she notes the treatment of women, often with sly humor, to offer a critique of patriarchal rules prominent among both upper-class whites and Solomon tribes.

She also discovered Jack’s modeling of her while typing some of his novels. As Jay Williams goes on to explore in the following essay in the present collection, both her personal history and her daily behavior on the Ranch underpin many of Jack’s female characters. In Burning Daylight Dede Mason is a highly competent secretary who lives in Berkeley. Her boss becomes infatuated with her. Later, he rides “beside her, glancing at her as often as he dared, she in her corduroy riding-habit, so bravely manlike, yet so essentially and revealingly woman, smiling, laughing, talking, her eyes sparkling, the flush of a day of sun and summer breeze warm in her cheeks.” In The Valley of the Moon Saxon Brown convinces her husband to leave the city. She has lost her baby, as Charmian did, and even meets a fictional Charmian in the form of Clara Hastings. Her husband is drawn equally to Saxon’s many competencies and to her “pretties,” her outwardly feminine manner.

The Little Lady of the Big House was inspired by Jack’s recognition that he had allowed work to distract him from attending to Charmian. In the summer of 1912 Charmian spent most of her time riding and playing music with Australian pianist Laurie Smith. Journalist Allen Dunn also fawned about her. Jack took note in his novel: “Paula flowed in upon him, all softness of morning kimono and stayless body” while her husband the ranch owner keeps an eye on a study of hog inoculation (83). A guest comes upon her on a horse diving into a water tank, “the white silken slip of a bathing suit ... molded to her form like a marble-carven veiling of drapery” (103). She plays Rachmaninoff “masterly, like a man ... with the calm and power of anything but the little, almost girlish woman he glimpsed.” Her husband brags that when breeding horses “she’s as remorseless as any man when it comes to throwing out the undesirables” (151). Charmian wrote a friend that Jack had to kill off his heroine because she couldn’t choose between her husband and the presumed lover. The two men together, the rancher and the explorer, were of course Jack.

Of all Jack’s books, The Little Lady of the Big House made the greatest impression on her. She had raised the specter of infidelity in real life, and Jack responded with what seemed to her a love letter and an apology. Of other books she remarked “a good deal of the idealization [of herself]” was present; “I was too close to the manuscript with a critical eye to realize as I do now how much he really knew of the basic Me” (Oregon Journal).
By 1914 London’s poor health reached crisis. Never robust, he now suffered from symptoms of serious illness. The couple spent much of 1914–16 alone on the ranch, in winters sailing in the Sacramento Delta, or in Hawaii. Dysentery while covering the Mexican Revolution landed him in the hospital. He needed frequent enemas and started to use morphine. At times he skipped dinners in order to rest.

Charmian learned enough from doctors to accept that Jack’s failing health was potentially fatal. Because they slept separately, she was unaware of the extent of his morphine consumption for gastric discomfort and arthritis. At the 1916 State Fair pain so wracked him that they left early. A French film company several weeks later captured him bloated yet smiling as he showed off his piglets. Despite repeated gastric distress, he expressed high spirits and planned to add more worker housing and a school to the ranch. On 22 November 1916 Jack London died in bed of uremic poisoning.

Fulfillment alone

However much Charmian appreciated her life with her husband, widowhood was more consistent with her temperament. She could be alone as much as she wanted and no longer need host a crowd of long-staying visitors. She determined never to marry again. She felt the worst had already happened to her, the loss of Joy and then Jack. “Well, I still have Eliza, and she is Jack’s and my true sister!” (Diary 3 January 1917). Days later she wrote of how she and Jack knew he was going to die, that the Unthinkable was about to happen.

The two women faced a difficult future. Jack’s will left everything to Charmian, to the neglect of his first wife and two daughters. Arranging what they thought was fair support was challenging. In addition to them, Charmian had the separate households of Jack’s mother and his foster mother, Virginia Prentiss, to maintain. Both women agreed that Jack’s primary commitment had been to the ranch, and they were determined to save the land. This meant mining his current and unpublished works with both publishers and the movie industry. Taking advantage of their separate skills, Eliza continued to oversee farming decisions, business accounts, and contracts, while Charmian pursued creative projects and public relations. She continued her interest in the ranch animal breeding program as well.

Writing seven days a week, Charmian juggled several projects. An article on British Women in Wartime never found acceptance. Watching several performances of opera singer Tadaki Miura inspired her to complete a book Jack had started, Cherry, the story of an interracial affair between a plantation owner’s daughter and a Japanese gardener in Hawaii. It eventually appeared in highly edited form as a serial in Cosmopolitan.
Working on *Our Hawaii* for Macmillan, she wondered what Jack would think of his “Kid-Woman writing a book, unaided, and no servant in the house” (Diary 20 June 1917). The book explored island life a decade after the American capitalist expulsion of Hawaiian rule. Although there were balls and dinners with elites, others interested Charmian more: vanquished royals, lepers, and the plantation workers. Leaving on the boat for Molokai, she listened to the lamentations, “shrill, piercing” as the afflicted separated forever from families, “a funeral in which the dead themselves walked” (C. London, *Hawaii* 118–19). When she saw the finished book she was disgusted by the misuse of some words and needless repetitions, but it sold well.

Life was not all work of course. Charmian remained at the cottage while planning a home of her own, the House of Happy Walls. Albert Farr designed a building reminiscent of the Wolf House with its volcanic stone and red tile roof (see Figure 10). The interior seems strange for a private home, as it contains a large room covering over half the house on the first and second floors, a kitchen on each floor, and a secret stairway. This odd configuration reflects Charmian’s intention, that the building be a museum in honor of her husband. Her plan proved prescient once the property became a historic park.

Her attention to detail hampered completion. She ordered roof lintels with unique carvings based on South Sea Island motifs and coved trims on the wall bottoms so they would clean easily. It was years before she settled on the sea green colors in the dining room and interior kitchen tiles. Separation of public and private space explains the second kitchen, a place where she could make tea and sandwiches without going downstairs. On a wall separating the staircase and main first-floor room she converted a South Sea carving to hide

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**Figure 10.** The House of Happy Walls, now a museum at the Jack London State Historic Park. Source: Jack London State Historic Park.
a small opening so that she could look on visitors before continuing to greet them. Throughout the house large windows brought in light from a hilly landscape of moss-laden oaks, twisted manzanita, and giant ferns. Unlike today, where mature trees shade the home, the valley below was then visible beyond the branches.

Visitor Ann Ruggles Bean recalled how the two “relaxed against the window panes on black leather cushions and allowed our gazes to travel across a wide expanse of beautifully polished floor strewn with South Sea island rugs and walls hung with Marquesan Island tapa cloths and an occasional fine painting” (11). An adjoining room held Jack’s library. Charmian explained how she designed the large dining table and selected china identical to that used by Captain Bligh on the ship Bounty. A small fountain featured a Finn Froelich sculpture of Charmian barely clothed on horseback, a reference to The Little Lady of the Big House—and a motif Charmian adopted for the design of her bookplate.

In contrast to the first floor, Charmian designed her private chamber with a ceiling curved and beamed like a ship captain’s cabin. She set about South Sea artifacts along with Oaxacan rugs. She placed Jack’s large cubbed desk in a corner to use for her own writing. Within this immense room she set a mattress on a raised platform behind a screen of tapa cloth. The adjoining closet, dressing room, and kitchenette allowed her to spend all day upstairs without ever having to descend. Charmian explained to Bean the difficulty of finding the exact shade of vermillion to match lava-lava cloths hung beside her linen closets.

The significance of every detail is clear from a letter written to a friend. It would be “my house, Anna, not Jack’s nor another’s—my own expression of myself and the life I seem led to live. It’s quite wonderful, this new self of mine—sometimes I think Jack would have liked this new, real Me—tho’ she’s perhaps less clinging” (C.K.L. to Anna Strunsky, 26 October 1919). If the exterior hinted of Wolf House, the interior was quite dissimilar. The use of pale wood, the greens and aquas of the sea, the sparse furnishing spoke of an aesthetic opposite from the dark paneled hunting lodge of the burned-out relic. Despite its extremely efficient plan, the House of Happy Walls was Charmian’s vision of beauty, one still aligned with Arts and Crafts style.

Based on the success of her two travel books, Macmillan editor George Brett encouraged her to write The Book of Jack London, which is partly a pastiche based on the mass of letters and her diaries from the marriage. (She initially hoped Jack’s close friend poet George Sterling would write the book, but he agreed only to help her with editing.) When Brett suggested it was too long at two volumes, she placed it with Century, along with Mills and Boon in England. Charmian did accept Brett’s request for a new edition of Our Hawaii, and published it with the subtitle Islands and Islanders. It is essentially a different book, for she removed ten thousand words of her writing to
substitute three essays Jack wrote before he died, as well as adding updated information based on her 1919 return to the islands. Her English publisher recognized this was not really a second edition and titled the work *The New Hawaii*.

Another sign of Charmian’s change is how during this house planning she terminated direct contact with Netta. She had Eliza Shepard set up a trust and allowed Netta to sell Charmian’s last remaining rental property in Berkeley to fund it. Despite these gifts, Netta exhausted the monies and did something worse. Edward Payne had a friend whose automatic writing claimed to be that of Jack from beyond the grave. After he died in 1924, Netta found a publisher for *The Soul of Jack London*. Therein “Jack” apologizes to the Paynes for wronging them and confesses his personal failings. Even Arthur Conan Doyle, then a leading Spiritualist, contributed a statement in the book to assert the material was London speaking from beyond the grave. This was one of several instances where Charmian discovered she had little power to influence or control others’ writings about her husband.

In response to Netta’s actions Charmian remade made her will. First, she entrusted everything to Eliza, her “Dear Sis,” in appreciation for her work and personal support. Second was her request that a museum contain all her memorabilia and photograph albums, “to keep all possible Jack Londoniana together on the property bearing his name.” In fact, in order to save the ranch one of her decisions was to sell materials to the Huntington Library in San Marino, where the albums now reside with virtually all paper materials and manuscripts. The unfortunate consequence of this legacy was the final exclusion of Jack’s blood descendants. Joan London had to receive Charmian’s permission to read her father’s archives at the Huntington Library. This exclusion biased biographers, who until recently overlooked London’s first family, whose members had information of consequence.

The most significant change in her life was intimate. Charmian was an active merry widow, one of her first affairs being with Harry Houdini through intermittent meetings over several years. She was seldom exclusive and had little difficulty finding someone for an amour. During the many sea voyages she took in the 1920s and 1930s, she regularly had a fling. There was a Danish Prince and a World War I veteran, a New York bibliophile, and a much-younger personal assistant. “Am full of music and also memories of last evening. Oh, men, my! It was high time for him to be sent away. One can’t love ‘em all, alas” (Diary 11 November 1922). One evening she burned the letters from seven lovers. One serious affair stands out, with Frederick O’Brien, the handsome best-selling writer of South Sea travel adventures. His French wife Gertrude seems to have approved this dalliance. If sensuality is an aesthetic (see Figure 11), Charmian explored its artfulness as a favorite hobby.
Charmian’s wardrobe complemented her new attitude. While Arts and Crafts became passé after World War I, it left its mark nonetheless. Its dress reforms released women from the exaggerated feminine silhouette and removed excessive ornamentation. The flapper era pushed the changes further, toward a boyish figure lacking bosom or waist. The Victorian horror, an exposed ankle, now gave way to shapely calves. Charmian even made headlines when she bobbed her waist-length hair. The new mode was associated with youth and modernity, the stock media figures being college students. “Motors, movies, jazz-music, freedom of action, liberty of thought, the rights of individuals—all these facts and theories surround us, threaten us, excite us, and tempt us. We are experimenting with vital things, and we are bound to make mistakes; only, dear Mr. Grundy, don’t let your contemporaries judge us without realizing the seething, bubbling, changing, electrical world into which we have been flung—” (Hirshbein 116).

Charmian was in her fifties, but she agreed with the youth. If Happy Walls signified a New Charmian, so did her clothing and her work. Key activities

**Figure 11.** Charmian naked beneath a swath of silk fabric, early 1920s. Sculpture is of her in the cap she wore around the ranch. Source: Huntington Library.
were to raise income through working with the movie industry, arranging translations of London’s books, and publicizing his work in Europe. Wearing a leopard coat and hat, in 1922 she boarded a commercial steamer to go abroad (Figure 12). She preferred the slower pace of travel and the opportunity to live among the crew instead of socializing on a passenger liner. The handful of other non-crew were sufficient for entertainment and possibly a flirtation.

She expanded her attraction to clothing as art. As design historian JoAnn Stabb discovered in her extensive study of the wardrobe, Charmian must have studied Paris couture while abroad. Unable to afford the originals she ordered copies made both abroad and in Oakland. These included a linen white leisure outfit inspired by Chanel’s beach pajamas and an orange brocade and tulle gown based on Lanvin. Her love of Orientalia continued, except now her jackets followed the example of Paul Poiret. She ordered velvet dress coats and theater jackets with silk linings. She added unique millinery in Paris and handmade dress shoes with Cuban heels in Berlin and London for her dancing. Eliza Shepard encouraged her to enjoy the European royalties from both her and Jack’s books because it was difficult to transfer money to the States.

Figure 12. Traveling to Europe, 1922, in a flapper suit with rosary for a necklace. She did not bob her hair until 1924. Source: Huntington Library.
By the early 1920s Charmian was a celebrity in her own right, known for her biography of her husband and even more for her travel books. In Germany, where her *Log of the Snark* had been serialized, 26,000 people attended an event in her honor. In Zurich, Vienna, Stockholm, Paris, and London she was feted and honored, with leading writers serving as hosts. Famous people asked to meet her, and she gained access to those she hoped to meet, such as Sigmund Freud. She became comfortable making speeches and doing radio interviews.

Figure 13. Charmian featured in a British *Tatler* caricature. Source: Huntington Library.
She returned from one trip with her bob’s bangs sculptured to a point above her arched eyebrows, a style that attracted journalists and even caricaturists (Figure 13).

When in the Bay area, she often went to San Francisco for balls, as she loved to dance, or to attend plays and the opera. She was a costume judge at the Beaux Arts Ball, having won prizes previously. Daringly, for one gala she constructed a strapless dress of tapa cloth accessorized with a headpiece of shell, bone, and human hair. She spoke for favorite causes, such as prison reform, animal welfare, and relief for Russian children. She attended benefits, such as one for Cecelia Loftus, an actor arrested for possession of “dope.” With suffrage now granted to women, she celebrated “My first vote! Get through it easily! Vote every Socialist name first, tho” (Diary 7 November 1922).

In the Bay area she was known more for these activities than as London's widow. When in 1921 the Oakland Tribune Year Book spotlighted “The Spirit of California,” it used her to represent the vigor and health of the state’s great outdoors. Nothing could be more fitting, they asserted, than choosing Charmian, a rancher and accomplished yachtswoman, as representative. “An expert horsewoman, and one of the first cross-saddle riders in California, she, today, keeps her stable of blue grass saddle horses on her Glen Ellen ranch…. Jack, when he had become betrothed to Charmian, learned from her to ride and understand horses, in order to be her complete companion” (28). This was rare public recognition of her influence in creating the ranch.

She bristled at being called “Mrs. Jack London,” but kept quiet if the event could stir up sales of his books. She endured being posed in the glamour girl presentation popular at the time. She learned to gain sympathy from the public by playing the role of the devoted widow. Behind the scenes she met with publishers, translators, agents, and publicists to protect her rights and ensure the best productive values. In a rare admission, she advised an interviewer that carrying on Jack’s work was “no sinecure” (Bland 28).

Charmian may also have used clothes to distract from her looks. Never beautiful, she did not age well. “I wish I were pretty so that charming people could take as much pleasure in regarding me as I do them,” she confided in her diary (28 January 1923). She lacked a strong facial bone structure and her skin wrinkled from all the sun exposure. She started to henna her hair and later changed to full red dyes. She might feel as popular as a movie star might, the way people noticed her on the street, but she lacked confidence that her talents and charisma would override her lack of beauty. By 1929 Charmian addressed her aging and mortality. There had been many unexpected deaths of family members and lovers, such as Houdini. She opined, “Knock, knock. Who’s next?” She checked into a hotel in Los Angeles that
disguised a plastic surgery clinic for a facelift. She remained there for weeks due to troublesome infections.

One who died was poet George Sterling, a friend of the Londons who killed himself in 1926 with cyanide. Invited to write a commemorative article, Charmian produced an essay of charming candor. “The world at large is prone lightly to consider an idiosyncrasy any departure from established custom. But George’s case was the other way around. From committing deliciously outrageous pranks to the delighted horror of his circle, he balked consistently at being seen carrying any kind of parcel no matter how neat and decorous” (C. London, George Sterling 1). Going on to discuss his hasheesh sandwiches and many infidelities, she absolved him of his failures. If he drank anything and everything, he just as fervently went dry for long periods. This portrait stands among her best writing.

The 1930s proved difficult on many levels. After breaking a foot in 1931 Charmian spent a year on crutches. She entered a troubled affair with a much-younger man, which left her feeling foolish. The Great Depression shrunk her income so much that she nearly had her electricity shut off. Living alone she kept a pistol by her bed for protection. On her few trips to San Francisco she bemoaned its alien crowds and the disappearance of favorite spots. She deplored how the emerging Golden Gate Bridge cut off the view from Bay to Ocean. Long suffering high blood pressure, she experienced lapses of memory, dizzy spells, and heart palpitations. In 1934 she almost died when her horse tripped in the field and rolled over her. Lying there, she felt “how incredibly I was remembered and loved and helped, born on a lifting wave . . . such an epic experience—the greatest of my life” (Diary 5 August 1934). She somehow survived with few serious injuries.

Charmian did not move to the House of Happy Walls until 1935, and then most unwillingly. Now Eliza’s son Irving lived with his family on the ranch and oversaw its management. Given the poor state of the economy, he decided to develop a dude ranch for more income. As it was, they depended on hunting for meat. Charmian found Happy Walls dirty and infected with termites. One day she concluded “my great achievement in House is that it will always remain mystery—too good to be real. Except to Charmian, whose creation it is. Never will be taken for granted—like my marriage in creation it is” (Diary 2 August 1935). Now sixty-four, she still practiced piano scales and passages of fifths, as well as sorted papers with plans to publish more articles and books. Declining cognitive abilities left her unable to plan and organize, though she was unaware of these new limitations. A fictional autobiography, Charmette, remained a collection of notes and papers stuck together with straight pins. As her world narrowed, she grew preoccupied with events in Europe, filling her diary with headline horrors. Her hoped-for book, an account of sailing around the Horn on the Dirigo, became a short
entry from her journal placed within *The Sewall Ships of Steel* (1937, edited by Mark Hennessy).

In 1937 Irving Stone resided on the ranch while he did research on his sensationalized and error-filled biography of London. What his notes show to be a book devoted to London as an American Intellectual instead reverted to a gossipy, misleading account that copied from London’s fictional works as facts. His description of Charmian was full of pejoratives, such as her being so “petulant” or “childish” that she was a burden for Jack. His greatest error was believing a local doctor who said Jack committed suicide. Charmian most despised how his swath of lies skewed the portrait of the activist writer into an alcoholic caricature.

Despite her health issues, Charmian went to Europe for almost a year during 1938–39. The silence of streets in Germany, the canceled appearances, set her fearful. Eye troubles prevented her from reading for five months. In Paris, Denmark, and England she was gratified to see her earlier trips returned good sales results. Hosts paid her expenses, booked her in first-class hotels, organized fetes, and arranged dancing partners. Nonetheless, she could be “so tired sitting through hours of foreign speeches, dead tortured with tobacco.... But that is *My Job*” (Diary, 6 July 1938).

One night she had a vision of Eliza stepping into the room surrounded by light and wrote to Eliza of such. Eliza responded that she had come out of a coma that same day with a vision of Charmian bathed in light. In New York on September 29 she received word Eliza had died. From then on, Irving and Mildred Shepard and their children on the ranch kept in contact from their house across the fields. They also placed Eliza’s ashes at the boulder near Wolf House that held Jack’s remains.

Back home, a new driver took Charmian down the winding Pacific Coast highway to Los Angeles. There she consulted on further London-based movies and met a variety of movie stars, although she was never star-struck. Her *Book of Jack London* became “Jack London,” with Susan Hayward playing Charmian. Among the few accuracies of the movie is Hayward’s wardrobe, exact copies of Charmian’s. She invited various Hollywood figures, such as Ronald Reagan, Jane Wyman, Glenn Ford, and Edward G. Robinson to the ranch to press for more adaptations. She still trained and rode her horses, sawed firewood, and went to costume balls at the Fairmont Hotel. Featured in a *National Geographic* article on the Valley of the Moon she stands in a red shantung suit, a black hat on her dyed red and frizzed hair, gazing at a bas-relief of Jack’s profile.

To Charmian’s surprise, Netta lived on. In 1937, following many years without direct contact, she attended Netta’s third wedding. After that husband died a year later during a hike on Mount Shasta, Netta wrote to say she had a vision that she should absolve Charmian of any further financial support, and did so, temporarily. Meanwhile she lied to Irving Stone about
her role in the couple’s affair and described Charmian in disparaging ways. When Netta died in 1944, Charmian could not complete a requested obituary, and ignored the funeral.

In 1945 Charmian was bedridden for months following an operation. “Practice piano in evening. Begins to show. Wonder where the pianist is.... Am I, Charmian, through?” (Diary 27 December 1945). She remained in Happy Walls until 1953, when she broke her hip in a fall. The Shepards moved her to the cottage, much closer to their home, and hired nurses to care for her. She died there in January 1955. The local Sonoma Index-Tribune recalled “her engaging smile, her splendid intellect, the eternal light she gave to Jack London.” The Shepard family placed her ashes alongside those of Jack and Eliza.

The artful life and gender

Charmian Kittredge London proves an extreme example of the California woman during a major cultural shift in gender expression. Those on the forefront of the movement challenged mores by pressing for acceptance in traditionally male enclaves and pursuits such as painting and photography, by working for suffrage, by testing old myths concerning female physical ability and courage. Through her marriage to a man who opened opportunities unavailable to other women, she fulfilled her defiant style most completely during travel adventures. Working alongside London as typist and editor, and later on as widowed promoter, was for her a worthy profession. It had been London, respectful of her ability, who literally nagged her to shape her Snark diary into a book.

From a gender perspective, Charmian seems stuck in Jack London’s shadow, a conclusion she worked to create. He is the central character of her books, where she reveals little of her own opinions and personality. In The Book of Jack London she obscures her past and reveals little of her place in his life, apart from being much-loved wife and companion. This was her plan, to elevate him, his writings, and his beliefs. The result is saccharine hagiography, because she intended it for marketing purposes. Survival of the Beauty Ranch required income from his books and stories. On their honeymoon he instructed her how to deal with journalists, how to establish a public persona, and she moved accordingly from that time. This makes it easy to conclude she was more traditional than in fact.

Charmian was also intensely private. Although she kept diaries, they are not narratives. Written in small pocket books, they note events, places, and physical symptoms with little interpretation. To indicate a lover she invented nicknames or symbols. Sometimes she wrote in shorthand. She must have destroyed letters as well, because so few remain to her closest friends—this when she typed Jack’s letters in triplicate for historical purposes.
Her commitment to an artful life lurks within her diary. On breaking in a new pony, she remarks, “It put me in time with the infinite, if anything ever did. I was soon deep in poetry, feeling beauty” (Diary, 5 June 1922). Another day the “Lovely spring continues. Feed goldfish corn meal. They fight for it. Bird songs so thrilling, all day long. A meadowlark trills in the night” (19 April 1922). The daily hours working with horses, the rides over the thirteen hundred acres of mountain, conspired to nurture this need for experiencing nature. She might break out in song as well. When indoors and not writing, she was working at her Steinway, the music another fount of imagination and ecstasy. She created a room at the cottage she called her Bower, a place of comfort filled with fresh flowers (Figure 14).

In spite of her active sexuality with men, Charmian depended on women for emotional intimacy. Diary comments imply she held back some feelings from her husband to avoid conflict. She kept female friends for life, such as artist Grace Hudson, actor Pauline French, writers Mary Austin and Gertrude Atherton, Hawaiian author Armine von Tempski, and adventurer Osa Johnson. Her final diaries commented on her love for her women friends, her grief when they died. As in so many women’s lives, these commitments remain visible only in traces, seldom in public documents or newspapers.

A celebrity in her own time, Charmian vanished from the stories. She was admired in the Bay area for her accomplishments, and eventually so overseas. Yet decades later her image became that of the woman behind

[Figure 14. The “Bower” Charmian created in an unused cottage guest room. Source: Huntington Library.]
the scene, however visible she remained next to Jack in the hundreds of photographs. Biographers preferred the London persona, the man of adventure, to the artist of reality, a sensual man who loved opera and poetry. That she broke boundaries and used her celebrity to assert a woman’s right to individuality doubtless contributed to attempts to elide her significance.

Convinced she could never be a very good artist, Charmian found it fortunate to support an artist through her other talents. Without Jack, one wonders whether she would ever have married. Had she relented, it would likely be someone who would expect her to stay home, well provided for, but with little opportunity to test her limits. Her artful life included many secrets beyond her charming public manner and sparkling conversation. If readers and critics doubted the truth of the androgyny represented in London’s stories, they spoke out of fear for what she represented. They would have been even more shocked to know her embrace of sensuality and sexuality. She was on the cusp of a massive gender change, fearless in her determination to live her life her way, through her vision of art.

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