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David O'Brien

book review of

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Marilyn R. Brown, editor

Picturing Children: Constructions of Childhood Between Rousseau and Freud

Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002

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Representations of children have recently been the subject of a number of important art historical studies, but such serious attention to them is new. As Marilyn Brown, the editor of this volume, points out in her introduction, within art history "visual images of children have often been marginalized as a trivial, sentimental, or...feminized sub-genre; frequently they have been interpreted as timeless or universal" (p. 2). In an effort to remedy this situation, *Picturing Children* offers twelve essays examining visual depictions of children from the "long" nineteenth century (from the end of the eighteenth century to the beginning of World War I). With one exception, all focus on British and French art, and by and large they stick to the work of well-known artists. But the perspectives offered by the authors are new and insightful, making this a valuable book.

The goal of the book is "to explore in selective fashion the Romantic ideal of childhood initiated by [Jean-Jacques] Rousseau as it developed over the course of the nineteenth century, and to attend to the visual transformation of that social construction during the historical period that eventually gave birth to the psychoanalytical theories of Freud" (p. 4). The "Romantic ideal" centered primarily on the notion that children are innocent, particularly in regard to sexuality. As Anne Higonnet puts it in the final essay, nineteenth-century European society equated childhood "with nature, hence with an innocent purity of vision and creativity" (p. 202).

The rise of the romantic ideal is left largely unexplored, perhaps by necessity given the volume's focus on the nineteenth century. We hear repeatedly that Rousseau is the fountainhead, but the circumstances that led to his writings and their popularity remain vague. An illuminating prehistory to the nineteenth century is provided, however, by Jennifer Milam's essay on changing responses to sexualized images of children over the course of the eighteenth century. Milam argues that François Boucher could paint sexualized children because few people worried about separating them off from sexuality. Viewers, both male and female, could chuckle at the sexual ignorance of the suggestively posed children in Boucher's paintings while simultaneously appreciating their own sexual awareness. By the time Jean-Baptiste Greuze was exhibiting pictures of adolescent girls mourning dead birds at the Salon in the 1760s, a new set of attitudes governed reactions to images of sexualized youth. Greuze's pictures offered moralizing narratives about the dangers of sexuality in adolescents even as they allowed men to fantasize about the girls in them. Milam's essay is perforce speculative because of its brevity, but it helps us to imagine what attitudes might have greeted images of children before the assumption of innocence that is still so with us today.

While there can be no doubt about the predominance of the romantic ideal of childhood in the nineteenth century, many of the essays in this volume raise questions about how precisely it functioned in European society. Most authors treat it as a deeply embedded

cultural belief, but George Dimock refers to the romantic child as a "political ideal" that various nineteenth-century figures knowingly employed as "a touchstone by which to measure the horrors of modernity" and "a catalyst for moral outrage and inspiration for change" (p. 193). Susan P. Casteras's survey of British fairy painting reveals that, when artists attached a pair of wings to the body of a girl and removed her to a fantasy-land, they could portray her engaged in all sorts of transgressive sexual activity. Such images suggest that the romantic ideal competed with, perhaps even spawned, contradictory desires that could be expressed and gratified in only indirect or covert ways. Lewis Carroll's photographs of the Liddell children are frequently suspected of embodying precisely such perverse desires, but Diane Waggoner, in an essay that is notable for its close attention to details of form and technique, offers a fresh reading of this work. According to Waggoner, the distinctive aspect of Carroll's images lies in his ability to get children to perform their expected roles, and to call attention to his own role in staging the performance. The deeper disturbance created by Carroll's images may be that they expose the behavior of children and adults to be less a question of nature than of performance.

While Waggoner asks us to think of childhood as performative, other essays expose the different perspectives elided by focusing on a unitary romantic ideal. Greg Thomas demonstrates that Auguste Renoir painted girls with the same pretty features and passive expressions favored by the burgeoning doll industry. In contrast, Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot subverted the ideals promoted through dolls and instead portrayed girls as willful, independent, and chafing at constraints. As Thomas writes, "The enormous contrast between Renoir's and Morisot's images points to tensions in the acculturation of girls in Parisian culture" (p. 112). Beneath the broad acceptance of the romantic ideal lay differences motivated by gender positions. This observation raises the question of how constructions of childhood differed according to other social categories, such as class and race, and draws attention to the focus of this volume on the visual culture of middle- and upper-class metropolitan society. Another line of research would be to turn to less canonical forms of visual culture in an effort to recover a broader range of constructions of childhood.

There are some unusual perspectives on childhood addressed in the volume. In his 1864 prose poem "La Corde," Charles Baudelaire imagined the life and death of a poor, young artist's model that broke completely with romantic ideals of both childhood and motherhood. The poem tells of the boy's suicide and the artist's shock at the callous attempts of the boy's mother to exploit it. Locke offers an intriguing interpretation of the poem, which was dedicated to Edouard Manet, as a depiction of "a painter whose certainty of his abilities as a reader of faces and a maker of illusions blinds him to other illusions, notably the nature of maternal love for a child—love which is not free of self-interest, financial interest, familial interest" (pp. 96–97). While "La Corde" explores the limits of the romantic ideal, it nonetheless testifies to its predominance in nineteenth-century bourgeois society, for the poem's power to shock depends on the reader's belief that children and mothers are fundamentally good.

Another unusual perspective included in the volume is that of children themselves. In a fascinating article, Carol Mavor proposes that the photographs produced by the young Jacques Henri Lartigue represent a distinctive world that could only be produced by a childhood gaze. Following Adam Philips, Mavor argues that, as adults, our memories of

childhood become hopelessly fragmented. Much like archeology, any reconstruction we make of our childhood can only further disturb and damage the fragments, even if we are able to recreate a whole. In Lartigue's photographs, concepts that are later split in adult perception, such as house and home, appear as unities, just as, according to Mavor, they would in the mind of the child.

Alessandra Comini examines a decidedly un-romantic view of childhood: images of sexualized children and adolescents in early twentieth-century Vienna. At the same time that Sigmund Freud's work was undermining the notion of childhood innocence by proposing that children are sexual from birth and learn to repress their erotic urges, numerous Viennese artists explored themes of sexual awakening, incest, adolescent masturbation, and pedophilia. The phenomenon addressed by Comini might suggest a decline for the romantic ideal of childhood, yet the revulsion of Viennese society in general when confronted with such themes points to a far more complicated afterlife extending into the present.

Essays by Daniel Guernsey and Petra ten-Doesschate Chu testify to the continuing importance of Rousseau's theories of artistic education and creativity during the nineteenth century. Guernsey convincingly argues that Rousseau's educational treatise *Emile* was the principal inspiration for the small boy standing before the painting at the center of Gustave Courbet's *The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory Summing up Seven Years of My Artistic Life*. The boy represents the innocent mind, removed from civilization to nature in order to be educated into Courbet's artistic and social program. Chu examines numerous nineteenth-century biographies of French artists and finds similar narratives regarding their subjects' childhood. Among other plots, there is often a family romance in which the young artist rebels against the father and is nurtured by a loving mother. A common Rousseauian trope in this literature is the connection between genius and nature. Most artists are in some respect self-taught: they develop their talent by consulting nature (often conceived of as a mother), which provides a corrective to the teachings of society and the Old Masters (a sort of surrogate father).

In a foreword to *Picturing Children*, Linda Pollock, the important historian of parenting and childhood, provides a brief overview of the social history of nineteenth-century children. This is followed by Brown's introduction, the pieces outlined above, and then two essays by pioneering historians of images of children, George Dimock and Anne Higonnet, who offer syntheses of the essays in the volume. Dimock, Higonnet, and Brown all suggest that the study of images of children might join other interpretive modes in art history, such as Marxism, feminism, queer studies, and post-colonialism, as a major new development in the field. Art history can certainly benefit from greater scholarly attention to the subject of childhood, to the various ways it was lived and imagined, but it seems to me too great a demand to expect the child to offer the same challenge to the discipline as have such categories as class, gender, sexuality, and race, if only for the reasons that children cannot speak for themselves, only temporarily occupy their position of subalternity, and have not generated the same thoroughgoing critiques of society as these other groups. Nevertheless, *Picturing Children* offers innovative scholarship of an exceptionally high level. It is rare for all the essays in such thematic volumes to relate clearly to the stated topic and offer critical

perspectives that play one off of another. The publication of this volume will surely inspire more attention to constructions of childhood in visual culture.

David O'Brien
Associate Professor of Art History
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign