

## Changing Histories of Childhood Through Imagery by Faith Grabarz

### Introduction

- Historians of childhood insist upon a dramatic shift in the way in which children are represented in art between 1700 to World War I.
- These scholars use contemporary imagery to support their claims.
- My project seeks to better understand this representational shift by analyzing a small group of paintings produced for the upper classes in the eighteenth century, and mezzotints, a type of print that re-interpreted these paintings for the middle classes in the early twentieth century.
- I focus on how the later artists updated the earlier images so as to reflect new ideas about childhood.
- At the same time, I seek to understand what about the eighteenth-century paintings remained vital for early twentieth-century viewers.
- I consider how Enlightenment ideals are embodied in the paintings, which depict robust children at ease.
- The mezzotints, however, portray spotless, pale children with idealized features.
- In reinterpreting the paintings, the early twentieth-century artists presented childhood as a time of perfect and fragile innocence.

### Mezzotints

- Mezzotints are a type of print but they are not exact copies of paintings. Details are left to the discretion of the mezzotint artist.
- Changes are made to make the image more appealing and more likely bought by the viewer for personal use.

### Enlightenment and Children

- As the 18<sup>th</sup> century progressed there was less of an emphasis on “the salvation of the child’s soul” and a greater emphasis that childhood is a time for enjoyment and education

- Children were seen less as little demons, tainted by the original sin but as good and gifts from God (Cunningham).
- Childhood was seen also as less of a preparation time for adulthood and more of a stage in life to be embraced and the way one raised a child also changed.
- The philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau's book *Emile* played a major influence on how children should be raised so as to remain good in a corruptive society. Rousseau believed early education should be derived interactions with the world and draw inferences from it.
- In the words of Children and Childhood Historian Hugh Cunningham, "The art of child-rearing became one of hearkening to nature, with free reign to grow, rather than bending twigs to a designed shape."
- Rousseau dictates how a child should be raised by stating in his book *Emile*, "How can the happiness of the child be attained? By bringing up a child in the ways of nature... achieve an equilibrium between the power and the will" (from *Emile*).
- Also in *Emile*, Rousseau asserts the right of a child to be a child and to be happy in it." Though Rousseau states raising a child totally "in nature" is impossible, "There is plenty evidence that people did aspire to bring up their children on Rousseau's principles influenced by *Emilie*."
- The changing ideas were often depicted in paintings and other images. There are more women, naturalism and children in images than depicted before

## English Painting

- As the English people gained more money they could afford art, and they wanted art of themselves.
- the English, according to Art Historian Marion Stokstad, wanted “...paintings no matter what the subject reflect enlightenment ideas including interest in social progress, an embrace of natural beauty, and faith in reason and science”. (Stokstad).

### Joshua Reynolds

- He mainly painted portraits of English gentry (Plymouth City Council).
- He was the founder of the “Grand Style” which incorporated the styles of Italian art into British portraiture (Guillard).
- He did this by making “the imperfect look perfect” through gesture, arrangement, expression, light and shade in his paintings (Guillard).
- He was the founding President of London’s art institute, the Royal Academy (Stokstad).
- He believed in imitating the masters in his works to educate patrons (Guillard).
- Later in his career he often painted children (Guillard).
- Rather than make his children models sit still by beating them, he used enlightenment ideas to keep the sitters still.
- He would tell the children stories while he painted to keep them entertained and less likely to fidget.

### The Age of Innocence

- Here is the painting The Age of Innocence by Joshua Reynolds from c.1788 and here is the mezzotint c.1910

- The Age of Innocence depicts a young girl, the artist's niece, Mary Theophila "Offy" Palmer (Guillard).
- The pale child in white clasps her hand and looks off into the distance, while a gravestone sits in the background.
- There are a variety of ideas as to the meaning of the painting.
  - The child could be mourning the death of a loved one as a model child with her hands clasped, with pale clothes and features.
    - A model child was an extreme example of how a perfect child should act. It was not uncommon at the time to document children acting very religious
  - The Children and Childhood Historian Hugh Cunningham takes the position that the subject is mourning the imminent death of innocence as one grows older.
    - On Page 56 Cunningham states, "Seated in the countryside (the 'natural' setting for children) Offy, about six years old, is a reminder to the adult viewer that the age of innocence is to be treasured for it will pass.
- Although the child is in the light, the background is dark, a hint of the things to come.
- This painting and others like it, were much reproduced in the nineteenth and twentieth century a romanticized vision of childhood emerged."
  - the girl could be deceased and is mourning her own death.
  - Cunningham mentions that deceased children were painted at times
- There are several differences between the mezzotint and the original painting.

- In the painting the girl has darker eyes and hair. She is also set in a darker background which gives an overall moodier feel and her feet are dirtier in the original giving a more realistic appearance.
- Within the mezzotint the mood is much brighter and uplifting. The colors are more vibrant, and the bright blue sash contrasting with the clean, bright white dress is much more chaste in appearance.

### Joseph Wright of Derby

- He is well known for being one of the first to paint industrialism (Stokstad).
- He is also known for using the “Chiaroscuro effect which emphasizes the contrast between light and dark (Stokstad).
- His paintings, especially his portraiture often showed the ideas of the middle and upper middle class who could now afford portraiture (Revolutionary Players).
- Rather than the flamboyant upper class paintings, “pragmatic and materialistic provincial middle-class entrepreneurs began to appear on artists’ canvasses.” (Revolutionary Players).

### Arkwright Children

- Richard Arkwright, a friend of Wright was the grandfather of the children in the painting was an entrepreneur who grew up in a poor family.

Arkwright Children with a Goat (Painting Image 7) (Mezzotint Image 8)

- Here is the painting *The Arkwright Children and Goat* from 1791 by Wright of Derby, and here is the mezzotint counterpart from around 1910
- ‘*The Arkwright Children and Goat*’ depict three Arkwright children with the youngest one mounted on a goat with his brother and sister keeping him safe.
- Within both images the sister holds the goat’s horns so they won’t accidentally hit the rider
- The other brother is keeping his little brother safe by holding him and making sure he doesn’t fall off.
- Rousseau states that one should not protect a child from being in danger but the image shows that one should protect a child from danger (Rousseau).
- which seems to reflect the reality that people couldn’t live exactly like *Émile* in Rousseau.
- Although the image does seem to reflect Rousseau’s idea that children should learn from nature
- The children are learning in nature by experience, free of books as Rousseau dictates
- This is like the sister keeping the little brother safe by holding the horns in that it realistically depicts the inability to follow Rousseau’s idea of letting a child learn from experience, and by extension, learning from pain (Rousseau).
- Rousseau himself states his ideals for raising a child completely in nature are impossible
- The image is not realistic in that the children are well dressed and relatively clean while playing outside with animals.
- However, within the mezzotint the look overall is much too perfect and therefore unrealistic.

- In the mezzotint, the children's features are softer, their skin is much paler and their expressions are not as strong and dynamic than those of the original.
- The children's cheeks are rosy but not the vibrant red almost covering their face from their outdoor activities in the painting.
- The sister's appearance has altered rather drastically.
  - o Her dress is more vibrant, its reds and blues pop more (possibly to attract buyers).
  - o Her hair changes from being a muddy brown color to a raven color, giving her a more striking appearance.
  - o What also changes is she seems to blend more into the tree.
  - o Not only is the tree a representation of her stability (and ability to protect her brother), she also seems closer to nature.
  - o The idea of women being closer to nature than men flourished during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> c.

#### Arkwright Children with Kite (Painting Image 5) (Mezzotint Image 6)

- Here is the Arkwright Children with Kite by Wright of Derby from 1791 and here is the c.1910 mezzotint counterpart
- Within this picture three brothers are posing with a kite.
- Like the Arkwright Children with a Goat, the mezzotint is much less realistic with the brighter scene, the figures having softer features, paler skin, and rosy cheeks.
- In the painting, the background is dark and cloudy except for a patch of blue sky while in the mezzotint the sky isn't as menacing.
- In the painting the boys are well dressed and relatively clean though they are not as clean as they are in the mezzotint

- In both images there are shadows across them except around their upper body.
- This could be a sign of immanent maturity as could the dark sky with the patch of blue skies, a sign that maturity will soon obscure the happy clear skies of childhood.
- Like stated for the previous painting, the children are outside in accordance to Rousseau's idea of children being in nature (Rousseau).
- Although the painting is unrealistic in portraying children playing outside in their nice clothes, the mezzotint is far less realistic with not only their cleanliness but their perfected features.

## French Painting

Many French painters turned away from Rococo paintings because of their association with the detested royalty and painted moralizing images instead.

## Greuze

- According to Art Historian Marion Stokstad, Greuze's major source of inspiration came from the kind of middle-class drama that Diderot had inaugurated with his plays of the late 1750's... (of) "middle tragedy" that taught useful lessons to the public with clear, simple stories of ordinary life... In paintings Greuze offered wives and children lessons on how one should or shouldn't behave." (Stokstad).
- Diderot and Greuze were inspired by each others
- "Diderot thought art's proper function was to "inspire virtues and purify manners." (Getty Museum).

- Rousseau's attacks on artificial civilization were in part inspired by Greuze's moralizing paintings (National Gallery of Art).

### Girl with Apple (Painting Image 3) (Mezzotint Image 4)

- Here's is Greuze's Girl with apple and bread from c.1780 and here is the mezzotint counterpart from circa 1910
- Both images involve a girl with an apple and that is where the similarities stop.
- The original depicts a poor, tired, wary girl who stares at the viewer, drawing them into the image. In the original the clothes are plain, wrinkled and not too well defined.
- A slice of bread and an apple sit in front of her.
- Her expression seems to show an appreciation for sustenance. In the mezzotint, the girl's appearance is more carefree almost daydreaming.
- The way she absentmindedly holds the apple makes it seem more like a prop or that she doesn't have as much respect for food as her painting counterpart does.
- Within the mezzotint the subject's cheeks and lips are rosier, her hair is a shiny gold color, her blue eyes are bright, and her clean outfit add to the all too perfect appearance.

### Conclusion

- All of the images have accuracies and inaccuracies.
- One should take into account the paintings were meant to be on display in people's homes, to have something pretty to look at and to show the owner is cultured.

- Therefore all of the artists seem to have catered to the demands and made the images more ideal.
- It is my belief that the changing ideas of childhood from 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> c. are reflected in these images
- The Arkwright children, along with the subjects in the other paintings are depicted as how an enlightenment child should be raised- in nature in order to remain good, learning from experience and from their peers. But the mezzotints thought they still retain these ideas of enlightenment also reflect an even greater emphasis on childhood and a romanticized view of childhood that shows the children as sweet, perfect beings. Perfect to the point that they look less realistic and dynamic than the paintings they were derived from.