



Childhood as a Theme of Interest for Artwork: A Study of Contrasting Representations of Childhood in Medieval and Post-Eighteenth Century Art

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Abstract— *The documentation of children and their narratives has been considered one of the least accounted for in history. It can be placed within the contribution of literature and art towards shaping the societal view, stemming from the space it provides to the representation of certain themes and identities. The presence, or lack thereof, of children from these spaces can be put under a scrutinizing light, observing the significant changes it underwent over the centuries. This paper attempts to observe the emergence of this space and its increasing intricacy over time – from children being painted in a religious light, to their one dimensional portrayal as young-adults, to an eventual, layered representation of the experience of childhood and the complexity of a child as an individual. The study will refer to several artworks throughout the course of history, contrasting medieval art with art from eighteenth century onwards. The focus will primarily be on their references to childhood and how their portrayal of children corresponds to the time the artworks were first created in.*

Keywords— *Art, Childhood, Middle Ages, Post-Eighteenth Century, Religion, Young Adults.*

MEDIEVAL ART

Perceptions of Childhood in the Middle Ages

The discourse surrounding the portrayal of children in art and literature of the medieval age has been rooted primarily in a retrospective look from a relatively modern time period, as opposed to a direct study of these texts within the context of their age. French historian, Philippe Aries, has been credited as a significant contributor towards the perception of the Middle Ages as one lacking a concept of childhood. Barbara A. Hanawalt, in ‘Medievalists and the Study of Childhood’, places his famous work, titled *Centuries of Childhood*, within the critique of the historians who countered his view of the time.

‘In medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist; this is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken or despised.

The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children: it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young-adult. In medieval society, this awareness was lacking. That is why, as soon as the child could live without the constant solicitude of his mother, his nanny or his cradle-rocker, he belonged to adult society.’¹

This view of Aries leads one to believe that the years of childhood were not as clearly distinguished by markers of time or behaviour in the Middle Ages. This resulted in its perception as a mere transitory stage, as opposed to a crucial stage in its own regard. There was also no clear

¹ Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood*, pp. 128; as cited by Hanawalt

point of separation between childhood and adulthood, implying an overall lack of understanding of children as sentient beings. The concept of childhood, as we understand it now, incorporates the intricacies of experiences and perceptions that mark our identity as a child and are necessary stages for shaping our identities as an adult. Aries's view takes away this depth of perception from the understanding of children in the Middle Ages, marking them with ignorance instead.

Before considering the portrayal of children in medieval art, one must question whether this perspective offered by Aries, who heavily influenced the modern perspective of childhood in the Middle Ages, does justice to the reality of the medieval understanding of different stages of life. Returning to Hanawalt's comments on his views, the lack of awareness suggested by Aries is countered by her with the existence of medieval "ages of man" literature. This incorporated the views of Hippocrates, Galen, Pythagoras and Aristotle, articulating the life of man as a product of different stages. She extends this to Bede's distinction of the stages of life wherein childhood was seen as moist and hot, youth was hot and dry, maturity was dry and cold, and old age, cold and moist. Bede attached distinct characteristic traits to these stages, labelling children as "merry, delightful, tender hearted, and much given to laughter and talk." (Hanawalt, 443) Historians have also commented on Europe's preoccupation with rearing and educating children in the late Middle Ages, so as to ensure a successful transition of the children into the adult world. These observations undercut the common perceptions of medieval society lacking a distinguished concept of childhood. The understanding of these stages in a child was perceptive enough to attach separate personalities to it so as to mark its difference from the following stages of adolescence and adulthood. The effort to prepare a child, whether through rearing or education, for a 'transition' into adulthood also implies an acknowledgment of the movement from one stage to another. This can only happen if childhood is perceived as a stage in its own.

Albrecht Classen also refers to the damaging paradigm established by Aries and subsequently, his followers. It proceeded to cement opinions of the medieval world being fixated on adults and caring little about emotions at all, except for erotic feelings between heterosexual adults.

One of the consequences of Aries' paradigm was that standard encyclopedia or major reference works on the Middle Ages simply ignore or neglect the topic 'childhood', and by the same token many aspects we now consider essential in

our investigation of emotions in the premodern period.²

He elaborates on the establishment of this perspective primarily as a result of the contrast offered by the image of the 'Dark Middle Ages' to the modern optimism and progressiveness – "the first projected as a dark time in which children bitterly suffered, and the second presented as a positive contrast—continues to be seductively appealing, though ultimately entirely misleading, especially with respect to childhood in both periods." (Classen, 5) The prerequisite to this idea of the Middle Ages largely being inconsiderate towards children was also provided by Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke and Rousseau. They presented their views on childhood as ones that did not exist in the Middle Ages, thus undermining the medieval practices that had prevailed long before the Enlightenment. Albrecht Classen's study also sheds light on the historical evidence backing the medieval thinkers on this front. He refers to Jean Gerson (1363-1429), who strongly suggested the importance of parents paying attention to their children's emotional needs. Mapheus Vegius (1406-1458) can be another example as he went so far as to reprimand parents for using physical punishment as a tool for discipline and education. He instead suggested that threats and physical abuse only incite fear and terror, causing a damage to children's psyche. Classen's observations then further the counter-argument that Middle Ages did, in fact, articulate the depth of childhood and expressed their views regarding the same in literature. The French historian Philippe Aries' opinion thus taints the existence of children in the Middle Ages with a lack of comfort, gentleness and understanding. Albeit the brutality of the age stands true when perceived through modern standards, the inert implication of this brutality transferring to a lack of attention towards 'childhood as a concept' is proved to be laid on hollow foundations.

Expression of Childhood in Art

With the idea of childhood being established as a clear object of perception, thought, and interest in medieval society, one can observe the portrayal of children in medieval artwork under the light of larger social and religious frameworks. The medieval era saw the collapse of the Western Roman empire, thus reflecting the sweeping popularity of Christianity. One can observe the heavy influence of religion in the form as well as content of these artworks. Phil Hansen, in his overview of medieval art history, refers to the Bible's prohibition of

² Albrecht Classen, 'Philippe Aries and the Consequences: History of Childhood, Family Relations, and Personal Emotions: Where do we stand today?', 2005, pp. 4

graven images, resulting in artists of the age avoiding sculptures “in the round”, that could be viewed from all sides. This led to an increased focus towards one dimensional and abstract art. This also links to the speculation around the portrayal of children in medieval art not being as aesthetically pleasing as the Renaissance paintings, for instance. The commitment to this style of art reduced in the Renaissance due to a shift in the values and attitude towards religion, resulting in a relatively more pleasing and gentler depiction of children. This form of medieval art could also have extended to the content in terms of the Christian belief in every individual being born with sin. With these ideas holding less influence over art in the succeeding centuries, the portrayal of children also becomes more innocent, or sinless. Phil Edwards, in his article for *Vox* interestingly titled as ‘Why Babies in Medieval Paintings Look Like Ugly Old Men?’, explores these portrayals of medieval babies as depictions of Jesus. These concepts of Jesus, he elaborates, were deeply influenced by the *homunculus*, or the ‘little man’. The idea of Jesus being perfectly formed and unchanged, expressed through the Byzantine painting, became a standard way of depicting Christ, and in turn, children. *Madonna and Child and Two Angels* (1283-84) by Duccio di Buoninsegna can be studied under this light. This can further be linked with Jacqueline Tasioulas’ reference to Christ, in his humanity, being the central focus of the artistic endeavors in the Middle Ages –

Images of the holy infant, beatific in his vulnerability, or of Christ’s passion, are ubiquitous, and testimony to the late medieval preoccupation with the human body of God.³

The idea of the innocence and purity of children thus found itself expressed through the religious imagery of medieval art. Some motifs in the artworks that follow this line of thought can be seen in the portrayal of children in the nude or as cupid-like angelic figures, signifying their purity. Repeated references to children in the holy scriptures also reflect the space children occupied in medieval religious consciousness.

The deeply religious portrayals of children, however, can also be used to place the intellectual and spiritual priorities of the time. One may ask the question – does the innocence of a child inspire the imagery of Jesus, or does the faith in Christ and his redemption of humanity find room for expression in the purity of a child? Considering the medieval *zeitgeist*, the advent of Christianity takes precedence in most spheres of society in

the Middle Ages. The depictions of children in medieval art thus finds itself within the folds of an overlap. There is an undeniable investment of thought in the idea of childhood and its representations of innocence and warmth. It is also perceived as a worthy enough subject to find plenty room for itself in the art of its time, albeit under the influence of religious overtones. This extends to the indisputable shaping of society, culture and the worldview by Christianity, making individuals, including children, an inevitable product of its influence. The concept of childhood is not perceived in medieval art as being independent of these influences, or purely on the grounds of what the experiences of childhood represent. Thus the focus is not so much on the child as an individual, or as a part of a group identity of ‘children’, but more so on the child as a canvas to express and advocate the purity and influence of Christ on. Reiterating the overlap of form as well as content of medieval artwork, one can thus observe the representation of children being fairly one dimensional.

THE TURN OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The perception of children’s condition in medieval society, established by modern thinkers, becomes relevant to a more recent relationship between children, art and literature. Although the perceptions were unfounded on several grounds, as has been explored previously in the paper, they reflected upon how those conditions changed, or are believed to have changed over the course of time. The religious portrayal of children underwent a significant stage up until the mid-eighteenth century, wherein children were portrayed as miniature versions of adults. The distinction lied in the depiction of children as faulty adults who require discipline and correction. One can refer to Van Dyck’s portrait of George Villiers, the 2nd Duke of Buckingham in 1635, serving as one example out of many. The portrait depicts the Duke along with his brother, Lord Francis Villiers, dressed in adult-styled clothing made to fit their small bodies. Their mannerisms, as seen in their stiff poses with toes turned out, hand on the hip and one leg extended forward, reflect the mirroring of the authority and masculinity embodied by the adults they observe, and eventually must grow into. The portrait then represents wealth and power, as opposed to the innocence and playfulness of childhood. Alastair Sooke, in his BBC article titled ‘How Childhood Came to Fascinate Artists’, refers to these appearances of children from royal and aristocratic families in art and succinctly writes – “they were not real people so much as emblems of dynastic ambition.” Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin’s ‘Boy with a Top’ (1735) can be seen as another example complementing Van Dyck’s portrait.

³ Jacqueline Tasioulas, “‘Heaven and Earth in Little Space’: The Foetal Existence of Christ in Medieval Literature and Thought”, 2007

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's study of the children as autonomous beings became one of the markers of the changing perceptions of children in the 18th century. In 'Rousseau's Children', William Kessen elaborates on this view –

...adaptability...the principle and its representations in other parts of Rousseau's work inform a radical vision of the child. The behavior of the child at any time is not incomplete or "preadult"; his thought and his action are appropriate for the stage of his development. At any moment, the child is a construction of impulse and the demands of his environment for his adaptation...Each stage of the child's development is a rebuilding of himself to effect a compromise between his passion and the requirements of his world.⁴

Rousseau's work provided a multidimensional view of children. It perceived the child as a thinking, sentient being that responded to its surroundings with its own resources and seeped in its influences in his own capacity. The stage of being a child then seized to be viewed as a mere transitional phase into the more real and more significant stage of being an adult. Childhood became a period of importance in itself, independent of the notion of being a pre-adult age. In fact, it reversed certain dynamics as the childhood that was seen mirroring adult behavior was now countered with adults reflecting and being shaped by childhood impulses and behaviors. This focus on the mind of a child was later cemented as a point of significance in the 20th century with Sigmund Freud's monumental study of psychoanalysis. His observations regarding the psyche of children proved to be more crucial to the shaping of adults than society could have fathomed. Psychosexual development, as a field, reiterated that children are much more complex as individuals than they are given credit for.

The rise of bourgeois values also aided the increasing focus on children in art and literature. The structure of the ideal bourgeois family became popularized with commissioned family portraits representing the tender, more human relationships between parents and children, as opposed to aristocratic formality and social queues. Realist paintings portrayed children as active, corresponding members of society that responded to societal scenarios. Using children as a subject in art dealing with social issues also became a means to emphasize on the intensity of the scenario. Fernand Pelez's *The Violet Vendor* (1885) depicts a child worker, exhausted from his day's work. The painting refers to the increasingly work focused culture that had been

enveloping the 19th century due to the Industrial Revolution. Perceiving a child as the subject, however, evokes more pity and sympathy for the plight of the impoverished, heightening the impact. Children becoming more commonplace in art also reflected in lighter portrayals of childhood, building its identity as a stage that must ideally be marked with playfulness. Peter Hansen's *Playing Children, Enghave Square*⁵(1907-08) and *The Skipping Rope*⁶(1907) by Joaquin Sorolla y Bastida serve as good examples for the portrayal of childhood as an age of careless gaiety that increasingly marked the coming centuries. It broke the mold of previous notions of children as serious young-adults.

The prerequisite to such portrayals can also be traced to the Impressionists of the nineteenth century. Referring to Sooke again – "there is an obvious kinship between the spontaneity and exuberance of Impressionist brushwork and the unpredictable vivacity of children, who are famously difficult to paint, because they rarely stay still."⁷ Impressionism, as a genre and a means of expression, suited the vibrancy of childhood and helped bringing it to the forefront in terms of the themes explored by art. The impressionist focus on capturing the essence of a moment, as opposed to its detail, seamlessly portrayed the essence of childhood and its blurred, fleeting existence. It also countered the prime subject matter of previous centuries being grand compositions involving religious and mythological undertones. Impressionism brought an intimacy to the subject matter, observing individuals in their everyday life. Claude Monet, the famous impressionist, painted several works of his child in gardens and outdoor settings. The paintings do not attach any overt narratives to the subject, capturing the simplicity of the moment, and in turn, childhood. *The Artist's Garden at Vétheuil* (1881) by Monet and *In the Garden at Maurecourt* (1884) by Berthe Morisot are good examples of these.

CONCLUSION

Children, and the depiction of childhood, can be observed as a consistent theme of interest in artworks. The means of expression of that interest, however, underwent significant changes over the course of history. The shift of the worldview, particularly between the Middle Ages and the Eighteenth Century, oversaw a change in man's position in the universe as well. Changing perceptions of the self, primarily from the notion of man being dependent on Divinity to man being dependent on himself, reflected

⁵From the collection of: SMK- Statens Museum for Kunst

⁶ From the collection of Sorolla Museum

⁷Alastair Sooke, 'How Childhood Came to Fascinate Artists', *BBC Culture*, 2016

⁴ William Kessen, 'Rousseau's Children', 1978, pp.158

in the changing subjects of art as well. Religious imagery gradually found itself leaving the forefront, providing room for more realistic themes that felt closer to man's immediate life. This shift translated to the perception and portrayal of children as well, albeit relatively delayed in comparison to adults. New historicists, for instance, considered children to be a group identity whose narratives had been overlooked in history, thus encouraging their representation in art and literature. The study of the individuality of a child added to this interest as it had not been explored due to the assumption of the complexity of adults preceding over children. The portrayal of children in artwork, across history, can thus be perceived as a subject that went from being a means to the depiction of larger themes (namely religious), to finding its own ground, independent of any looming overtones. Children started being perceived as their own people, not having to be attached with the notion of being 'Christ' or a 'Pre-Adult' but simply of being a child.

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