Children in Illustration: 
Images of Innocence Through the Ages

Children’s portrayal in illustration is often a reflection of how both creators and consumers viewed the ideal childhood of the time. They’ve been used to commiserate over a symbol of innocence lost, or shown as objects to protect; when directed towards children, depictions vary between encouraging a sense of adventure and guidelines as to how an ‘ideal child’ should appear and act. As a result of the latter, it has become all the more important for children to be able to see positive portrayals of themselves in media. Up until the 19th century, however, children were scarcely ever considered to be the implied viewer of media. Alongside the eventual haven that the illustrated child became for women illustrators, While these illustrations are framed in limitations of both the artist’s and the consumer’s point of standing, depictions of children in art still serve to inform us of their general perception at the time.

Prior to the mid-18th century, children were portrayed as identical to adults, both in appearance and behavior. There was little to no business with innocence about them – everything from their garb to their mannerisms was tailored to portray a certain image about their future adult social status. It was unusual for people outside of aristocrats and royalty to commission a portrait, and as such the children in pre-Romantic depictions are often accompanied by signifiers of their future power and property. One example of this can be found in Anthony van Dyck’s George Villiers, Second Duke of Buckingham and Lord Francis Villier, 1635 (Fig 1). The portrait’s subjects are positioned in a mimicry of conventional masculine symbols, with hands on their hips, feet turned outwards, and one foot extended. While their age is clearly young, they’re presented less as children than as a promise of who (and what) they will eventually become. Any child-like behavior is overshadowed by titles they have yet to grow into.
In many ways, these paintings trade in an accurate depiction of the subject’s character for a symbol of “dynastic continuity and a display of wealth”\(^1\). (This treatment of the subject is at least somewhat reflected in the early photographic portraits of the 19\(^{th}\) and 20\(^{th}\) century, although the medium discarded the focus on nobility for a wider range of accessibility.) Interestingly enough, the most lifelike images of children were found much in the same format as feminine nudity – if it’s in a religious context, anything goes. The winged cherubs and cupids that tumbled across depictions of Western mythology and religion were used to symbolize holiness and desire, respectively. The focus on religious imagery in relation to children and childhood is an enduring one, with the most well-known contributors being the earliest renditions of Madonna and Child.

However, the Romantic period saw a flourishing in depictions of children as artists began to branch out from austere portraiture and religious allegories. At the time, attitudes towards children and their upbringing were changing drastically as parents were encouraged to take a more active role in their child’s upbringing. In 1762, Jean-Jacques Rousseau published a work titled *Émile, or On Education*, which (alongside a section on women’s education that would later spark some proto-feminist retaliation) demonstrated his passion for breastfeeding: “[B]ut let mothers deign to nurse their children, morals will reform themselves, nature's sentiments will be awakened in every heart, [and] the state will be repeopled”.\(^2\) Though his thoughts on the matter of early-child parenting were not original, *Émile* sparked a revolution among the upper class in breastfeeding and swaddling, and the resulting upsurge of interest in familial ties would play a role in shifting the focus of children in art. (This is, of course, not to say that bonding between parents and children was completely absent before revolutionary movements such as the

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Enlightenment and the Romantic period took over thought and expression; rather, the case can be made that it was depictions thereof which were relatively scarce.)

Although there were outliers from pre-Romantic period art that were more lifelike than their contemporaries, the change in the late-18th century was palpable. Children began to act childishly in paintings, staring off into space and fidgeting in their formal clothes. Many patrons showed an interest in commissioning family portraits for reasons other than class prestige, which took on a more casual and close-knit domesticity. Mother-and-child portraits were shown with figures breastfeeding (an ironic fact, considering the current controversy over the subject). One of the most influential developments of the time was artists beginning to paint themselves in a familial context. In works such as Anton Graff’s *The Artist’s Family* (Fig. 2), there is no conflict or friction between the artist’s work and his family life. In stark contrast to the stiffness of earlier portraits, all of the figures are relaxed and naturally posed.

Naturally, many artists differed in their interpretations of children. In an example of pre-Romantic art, Jean-Baptiste Greuze downgrades children to a ‘literally inferior domain,’

shoving their reactions to the scene to an altogether lower level from the more arresting adults that dominated his pieces. In contrast, Philipp Otto Runge (said to be one of the great German masters of painting during the early Romantic period) would challenge this traditional hierarchy in his drawing *Parents With Child On A Table.*

In his image, an infant child is placed on a table between its unidentified mother and father, serving as the centerpiece arresting the attention of everyone present.

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4 ibid. 16-18.
During the earlier Romantic period, children’s depictions were also varied on a wider scale depending on location. German artists such as Runge focused on children’s connection to nature, creating images of healthy, robust infants with chunky limbs. Although this focus on earth and celebration was “gently diluted” in the next generation of artists (as his work became more accessible, many of Runge’s grander, more allegorical statements fell away), his work went on to inspire later artists’ imagery of children such as Ferdinand Hodler and Vincent van Gogh. While Hodler focused on spiritual aspects, van Gogh took on the earthy and empirical style in his *Marcelle Roulin* (Fig. 3). Here was child that would stand out as a “mass of ungainly infant flesh” against artists such as Renoir’s sweeter and more innocent appeals to Victorian sensibilities.

While painters across Europe dealt with the influx of interest in “genre” paintings and family portraits, a new area of illustration was laying its foundations - specifically, children’s book illustration. One of the earliest recognized children’s books in European media is Heinrich Hoffman’s *Der Strewwelpeter*, originally known as *Funny Stories and Whimsical Pictures with 15 Beautifully Colored Panels for Children Aged 3 to 6*. In these illustrations, we see some of the first media specifically created to be consumed by children. The images are printed with bright reds and greens, and the little figures featuring in stories such as “The Dreadful Story About Harriet and the Matches” are full of a comical grimness in a series of macabre punishments for their actions (Fig. 4 & 5). Here Harriet, who does not listen to her two cats’ protestations, is consumed by fire after playing with the matches she was told not to touch. The ending scene has her pets crying over a pile of ashes, which is all that is left of poor Harriet.

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5 Rosenblum, 42.
6 ibid, 46.
Hoffman’s stories signify the beginning of yet another way children are portrayed in media. Children have been used as images of status, reflections of mythological and religious allegory, and celebrations of innocence: here we have the cautionary tale, an extension of every warning footnote at the end of an old wives’ tale. This presentation is singular in that it regards children as the viewers, connecting them to the image in a way which had never been done before. The subject material is also a novelty - up until this point in art, insolence and children do not mix. Even in contemporary media, children acting out is either erased from reality (in her essay, Patricia A. Larkin-Lieffers states on the franchise *The Magic Schoolbus* that “the insolent child does not live here.”7) or shown negatively, as in *Der Strewelpeter*.

At the same time, Kate Greenaway was leaving her own mark in children’s illustration. Instead of depicting warnings against acting out, Greenaway’s children are nicely dressed and well-mannered. Her books served to positively reinforce good behavior in children; while general naughtiness and child cruelty was alluded to in passages, her illustrations themselves are peaceful and depict mainly cheerful, light scenes. Fashion, always closely tied to its contemporary artistic counterparts (and vice versa; the children depicted during the Romantic period were almost uniformly costumed), was greatly influenced by her depictions of mothers and children.

Greenaway’s work would prove revolutionary to the field of children’s illustration as a whole. While implementing similar imagery to her as other artists before her (placing her subjects in Romantic children’s clothing on a perpetually pre-Industrial Revolution countryside, for example), Greenaway’s work was successful due to her handling of her imagery. She was

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able to use the new innovations of mass-produced media and halftone printing to her advantage, and her skill and personal technique allowed her to flourish in both the professional art world and in business.

Due to the time period, Greenaway was never able to pursue a fine arts education, instead being regulated to what was seen as the “minor arts”.\(^8\) Although she loved creating depictions of children explicitly for children, she was constantly frustrated; by society’s limitations, by her peers, and most of all by high art’s derision of illustration as a trivial and sentimental area of focus. This did not abate in any way at the turn of the 20th century, with commercial depictions of child life and domesticity becoming a distinctly feminine portrayal; indeed, it was hard for women to find work depicting anything else.

As they were so restricted against identifying with any other type of image, the audience for the innocent child grew exponentially. During this time, illustrations began to delve into the area of contemporary childhood in product illustration and advertisements, expanding the image beyond the central figure while keeping them as the main focus (Elizabeth Shippen Green in particular was very adept at this). As the Golden Age of Illustration arose, so too did prominent women illustrators such as Jessie Wilcox Smith, Violet Oakley, and Elizabeth Shippen Green. All three were students of the renowned illustrator Howard Pyle, who inspired an entire generation of illustrators through his institutional teachings (collectively known as The Brandywine School). Pyle was unafraid to teach in ways that went against the convention of the time, upturning the notions that barred women from pursuing a full education in art. The three

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\(^8\) Higonnet, 52.
women formed a group known as the Red Rose Girls, defying societal expectations by fully supporting themselves through their work.\(^9\)

Later on, as the Golden Age waned into the 1920s, another prominent figure in illustration pulled up a new passion for a hybrid of childish innocence and fantasy in the form of flower fairies. At the young age of 15, Cicely Mary Barker became popular for her illustrations of children as fairies standing next to and interacting with a variety of flowers, showering the viewer in botanical symbolism as well as waiflike, ethereal innocence. For nearly half a century, illustration was a profitable and promising area for women artists, especially in depictions of childhood. However, a few decades into the 20th century, illustration began to decline due to advancements in photographic technology. Interest in the innocence of children did not diminish as much as it was transposed into the next medium, with many photographs calling on visual references to famous paintings and illustrations of old.

By this time, most of the world was also engaged in World War I and II, which created a singular demand for propaganda art. In the posters, flyers, and other works, children were as innocent a presence as ever; this time, however, their innocence was clearly exploited in an appeal to the viewer’s pity. In *Avez Vous Place Dans Votre Coeur Pour Nous* [Is There a Place in Your Heart For Us?] (Fig. 6), an undated war poster from 1914-1918, two children are shown against the war-torn background of occupied France. The girl, hand outstretched, is clearly begging the viewer for help, and the halo in the background created by the clouds has clear religious connotations. In contrast, Fred Spear’s poster titled merely *Enlist* is short and to the point; he shows a drowned mother and infant, a direct relation to the sinking of the Lusitania (a British civilian cruise ship that was torpedoed during the beginning of World War I. There were

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\(^9\) Higonnet 66-67.
other war propaganda posters that were less morbid in their portrayals of children, if just as heavy-handed. In *Victory Bonds* (Fig. 7), a cherubic youth appears to be asking her father to buy her a bond, smiling entreatingly up at the viewer in a way meant to be reminiscent of their own children.

The connection of children and inherent goodness in relation to patriotic duty was very prevalent as time went on, appearing again in World War II’s propaganda posters. The advertisements of World War II were much the same as before, save for their content now entreated the children to do their as much as their parents. Young boys developed a puckish flair in illustrations, with freckles and a gap-toothed smile becoming synonymous with Twain-esque days of idyllic youth (race was, as ever, noticeably absent through restrictions on illustration guidelines up until the Civil War). Meanwhile, depictions of girls became concerningly overt in their tailoring the viewer towards certain aspects of womanhood. Looking at illustrations such as this Seventeen advertisement (Fig. 8), it seems almost as though the viewer is being pushed forwards in life until they reach a time when they can be desirable, and all thoughts beforehand should go towards preparing for that adventure into ‘womanhood.’ Some of this, especially in the post-World War II era, can probably be attributed as part of the backlash against women’s rights in the post-war environment.

On a more optimistic note of the 1960s, Holly Hobbie picked up the torch of women illustrators who created images of children and childhood to wildly successful reactions. Hobbie’s work greatly influenced by her perception of children – she worked from home, with all three of her children growing up in various stages. When she heard that her illustrations of young girls in bonnets had become wildly popular, she was taken aback - Hobbie had never anticipated the overwhelmingly positive reaction her illustrations would garner. Still, perhaps as
a remnant of the earlier interest in childhood from the 19th century (or perhaps simply because her clean, whimsical designs of children in watercolor and pen are so appealing), Holly’s work became a household name. Against allegations that her art style and portraits were from a bygone era of illustration, Holly Hobbie replied:

I never intended the girls in my designs to be merely quaint, old-fashioned, or any of the clichés that some people seem to attach to them. I wanted them to seem a bit eccentric, and spiritedly individual – modest, I suppose, yet gingery and confident.\(^{10}\)

In the decades since, children’s portrayals have taken leaps and bounds. In media for children, artists such as Diane and Leo Dillon and Ezra Jack Keats have worked hard to bring diversity to their young audience. Meanwhile, classics such as Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* show us a modern child, one who (in complete contrast to the stiff portraits from centuries ago) has full agency over their actions, and is accordingly very active. (Among many other influences, Sendak traced his inspiration all the way back to Runge, showing just how influential those first depictions of children with agency were.\(^{11}\))

Children in art have always lent themselves to a greater purpose than their own representation. They began as metaphors for power and religion, stiff-backed and bedecked in symbolism; this gave way to a tentative exploration of the child in familial love, and the eventual abiding celebration of childlike innocence. They’ve been used to sell products, ideas, and motives, and when the Golden Age of Illustration crept around the corner, they quietly opened a gateway for women artists, otherwise barred, to create self-sustaining works of art. It is


\(^{11}\) Rosenblum, 50-51.
promising to see so many artists of today creating images of children for children, especially when they are making an effort to reach out to a wider array of people beyond the societal majority. Children may often serve as indicators of the time through metaphors and associations, but it is equally important to remember that beyond the portrayal is still a child, with all that this entails.
Bibliography


Fig. 1. Sir Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641) - George Villiers, 2nd Duke of Buckingham (1628-87), and Lord Francis Villiers (1629-48), 1635.

Fig. 2. Anton Graff, The Artist’s Family, 1785.

Fig. 2. Kate Greenaway (1846-1901), A Day in A Child’s Life, 1881.
Fig. 3. Vincent van Gogh, *Marcelle Roulin*, 1888.

Fig 4. Heinrich Hoffman, *Der Struwwelpeter*, English edition 1848.
Fig. 5. Walter DeMaris, *Aves Vous Place Dans Votre Coeur Pour Nous?*, US, undated, 1914-18.

Fig. 6. Sampson, *Victory Bond*, US, 1914-1917.
Fig. 7. Seventeen ad, 1947.