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Canadian Art: A Child's World

ANNUAL LOAN EXHIBITION
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Paul Peel (1860-1892)
Blossoms and Butterflies (1888)

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Mary Bell Eastlake (1864-1951)
In the Orchard (c. 1895)

FOREWORD

While working for my father at Galerie Walter Klinkhoff I had the honour of organizing in 1974 the gallery's first Retrospective Exhibition, featuring the work of the great Canadian Impressionist Maurice Cullen. None of the works were for sale, all having been borrowed from museums and private and corporate collections. It was a delight at that time to engage the visitors as they clearly enjoyed the experience of studying the works that were on display. More than forty shows later (devoted to well-known artists such as Marc-Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Coté, A.Y. Jackson, Clarence Gagnon, Marc-Aurèle Fortin, Prudence Heward, Kathleen Morris, Robert Pilot), I take great pleasure this year in presenting works based on the theme, "*Canadian Art - A Child's World*".

Viewers of the exhibition will doubtless be impressed by the outstanding works of art that are on show. The novel theme will also give rise to much discussion about the varied approaches that these artists have taken. I look forward to joining in with many animated conversations. While the paintings are not for sale (as they would normally be in a commercial gallery such as mine), I take the utmost pleasure in presenting a group of special Canadian works that are not generally available for public view. I am extremely grateful to the private owners of these paintings. While they deprive themselves of their "children" for a time, the owners are making a welcome contribution to the education of their fellow art lovers.

Finally, I am most indebted to Loren Lerner for her scholarly text and the innovative approach she has taken to address this fresh subject matter.

Eric Klinkhoff
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Canadian Art: A Child's World

LOREN LERNER

Introduction

Canadian Art: A Child's World considers paintings of children in Canada between the mid-nineteenth century and the 1950s, and explores how they changed over time. The paintings reveal that artists not only reflect popular definitions of what a child is, but actively participate in creating new visions. As these collective and personal forces invest the child with evolving beliefs, desires, fantasies and expectations, both what it means to be a child and artistic expressions of these early years of life are constantly changing. At the same time, developments in economic conditions, social attitudes and cultural trends also influence the meanings we assign to children and, as a consequence, the way artists represent childhood.

Child Portraits

Portraits are especially reflective of developments in society's perception of the individual. In *Mrs. David Douglas Young with Her Son, George Burns Symes Young*, an early portrait by Théophile Hamel (1817–1870) that recalls the style used when painting royal families, the child is displayed as a luxury item. The Young family's wealth is made evident by the finely upholstered chair, the mother's elegant silk satin dress with its lace collar, and the gold jewellery that attracts her son. George wears a dress, the costume typically worn by boys of this era until their breeching at the age of five, when they would be dressed in pants. While Hamel expresses with dignified restraint a mother's devotion to her son, George Théodore Berthon's (1806–1892) *Portrait of Two Children*, which captures Edith Grant and Sidonie Berthon, demonstrates the tender love of a young girl for her infant companion. The children are similarly attired in white muslin cotton and ribbon adornments, while the tartan scarf on the baby's lap suggests her Scottish heritage, in contrast to the origins of Sidonie's father, who hailed from France. Indeed, the child portraits by Hamel and Berthon provide a valuable record of families of this period and the importance people placed on charming images of children, which were thought to stimulate an aesthetic appreciation of family life.

Portraits of girls were well liked for evoking the innocence attributed to young children, a concept that dates to the late seventeenth century. Before then, children were regarded as small adults who needed discipline if they were to develop into well-behaved, productive citizens.

George Théodore Berthon (1806-1892)
Portrait of Two Children (Edith Grant & Sidonie Berthon)

This was particularly true for Christian children, who were born into sin, according to church doctrine. The originators of the concept of children as innocents were the philosophers John Locke (1632–1704) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778).[1] In *Some Thoughts Concerning Children's Education* (1693), Locke proposes that children at birth are a tabula rasa – a blank slate – whose future as adults depended on being educated through appropriate lessons and experience. Rousseau's premise in *Émile* (1762) is that man is by nature good and that society and civilization corrupt this goodness. Rousseau advocated raising children "naturally," by which he meant gently, with toys and through outdoor play, whenever possible. In Robert Harris's (1849–1919) *Portrait of Miss Georgina Smithers with Her Pet*, female innocence is suggested in the cherubic, doll-like features of the subject's face and the love she feels for her dog. According to Rousseau, the similar responses children and animals had to the natural world based on their sense perception, responses child and pet shared, was a foundational requirement for a loving family and caring society.

The emerging view of children as possessing personalities and capable of independent thinking is reflected in a later portrait by Robert Harris, titled *The Skipper's Daughter* (1908). Here the girl's expression betrays

her youthful impatience at having to sit still for a portrait, posed like a grown-up protecting herself from the sun with a parasol. Not until thirty-five years later do artists begin to convey the interior world of the child, as in Prudence Heward's (1896–1947) *Portrait of a Girl*. The bold colours and strong contours of this small painting of a girl's face express her intense character and the feminine ideal of an individual who has a sound sense of who she is.

The Care and Education of the Child

Genre paintings of children often show the mother as the protector and primary educator of her children. In Franklin Brownell's (1857–1946) *Homework*, the older daughter is absorbed in reading and writing while her younger sister, seated next to the mother, has fallen asleep in the midst of her sewing lesson. Executed in the Victorian mode of realist representation, this interior scene is attentive to the effects of the light from the oil lamp, which envelops the family in the warm and loving comfort of their home. From the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, the space most closely associated with girlhood was the house, where girls were trained in domestic skills and versed in literary and artistic culture. This training was essential if they were to become good wives and mothers. As such, the intimate composition of Brownell's *Arranging Flowers* has a distinctive feminine feel that connects the flowers on the girl's lap and those in the vase to fertility.

Franklin Brownell (1857-1946)
Homework, c. 1904

Emily Coonan (1885-1971)
Visiting a Sick Friend, c. 1911

Brownell's paintings visualize the ideal female education espoused by John Ruskin, the Victorian social commentator, art critic and educator who was highly recognized for his vision of how girls should be educated. In "Of Queens' Gardens," a lecture he delivered at Rusholme Town Hall on December 14, 1864, and published some months later in *Sesame and Lilies*, Ruskin writes that women grow organically: "But you cannot hammer a girl into anything. She grows as a flower does."[2] He also believed, as he explains in *The Elements of Drawing* (1857), that children should be taught drawing from nature because it trained them to see the world more clearly. He was convinced that developing accurate, insightful perception affected other forms of understanding, and that by comprehending reality directly as visual experience, children learned not to separate the visual from the emotional or the aesthetically pleasing from compassion for humankind.[3] Henri Beau's (1863–1949) *Painting in the Garden* represents this belief. The two girls sit in the family garden, French box easels perched on their laps, engaged in the creative act of plein air watercolour painting.

Most pictures of Canadian children during this period focus on the happy, healthy family and the positive feelings generated by an inviting home. Few confront the contentious issue of sickness, particularly tuberculosis

and other contagious diseases that afflicted all classes of Canadians before the advent of modern medicine. Emily Coonan's (1885–1971) *Visiting a Sick Friend* is an exception. A tired girl with a sallow complexion lies under a heavy quilt, barely able to peer out at her friend who stands at the far end of the bed. The sick girl's mother looks intently at her child, an expression of concern on her face. Coonan uses an Impressionistic style of sketch-like brushwork, unblended hues and simplified forms to capture the scene's emotional intensity.

Child's Play

The concept of child's play has evolved over time to encompass a variety of purposes, from self-development and the learning of new skills to participating in leisure activities purely for enjoyment or amusement. In *The Unruly Guest* by Robert Harris, the children of George Stethem, Esquire are depicted at play. The three sisters are posed around a toy tea set in a composition that recalls paintings of bourgeois women at leisure. The artist shows how upper-class girls were encouraged to imitate the elegant rituals performed by their mothers that defined domestic and social life. Boys, unlike girls, were permitted to be more active and assertive, to prepare them for the civic roles they were expected to assume as men.

Robert Harris (1849-1919)
The Unruly Guest; Portraits of Children of George Stethem, Esq. (1880)

Adrien Hébert (1890-1967)
Eaton's Window, Montreal (1937)

The boy's reprimand of the rambunctious dog refers to the belief that children needed discipline to learn appropriate behaviours. An inspection of the painting reveals a book on the floor near the boy and a folio of illustrations next to the oldest sister at the far end of the table. The serious looks on the faces of these senior siblings reflect their dedication to learning, which leaves little time for child's play.

The interrelation between play and education in *The Unruly Guest* is a recurring theme in pictures of children. However, Paul Peel's (1860–1892) *The Young Biologist* and *Luxembourg Gardens, Paris II* offer a much more carefree vision than is found in Harris's painting. They reflect Rousseau's view that unstructured outdoor play is the best and most natural expression of childhood. In both sun-lit works, the children, possibly the artist's son and daughter, play with toys that will help them develop a range of mental and physical skills – a wheelbarrow and pail in *The Young Biologist*, in which a little boy studiously observes a frog, and a hoop, ball and tiny horse and carriage for the little girl in the Luxembourg Gardens, a popular playground for healthy young children.

By the 1920s and 1930s the manufacture of toys was a huge industry. Childhood experts helped it flourish by using psychology to confirm the importance of playthings. Harriet Mitchell, a nurse and educational secretary at the Mental Hygiene Institute, wrote in *Play and Play Materials for the Preschool Child*, a pamphlet published by the Canadian

Council on Child and Family Welfare, that “the thing that most needs to be understood about play is that it is a necessity and not a luxury... as necessary to healthy development as are food and rest.”[4] *Eaton’s Window, Montreal* by Adrien Hébert (1890–1967) shows children and parents peering into the store's Christmas window where an elaborate display of toys suggestive of Santa's workshop is on view. The dolls, including two "Eaton Beauty" dolls, a boy on a sled and a cowboy riding a horse, appear to be interacting with the excited children whose faces and hands are pressed against the glass.

Child's play comes to a close with the growth of children into youth – that time of life between childhood and adulthood. *The Dead Bird* by Robert Harris shows an older boy tenderly explaining to his younger sister that her pet bird has died. In this way Harris links the canary's death to the boy's growing maturity and the girl's loss of innocence and newfound awareness of the difficult thoughts and feelings that mark her metamorphosis from child to adult. This interest in a young person's psychological and physical self-awareness is also present in Mary Bell Eastlake's (1864–1951) *In the Orchard*. In a painting that captures the shimmering effects of evanescent sunlight on colourful fruit trees, an older girl in a dreamy state sits on the ground next to a sleeping infant. The toy rocking horse by her side belongs to the baby she tends, a task that will prepare her for the duties and responsibilities of motherhood.

Adolescence was recognized as a distinct stage of human development only in the late nineteenth century. The first psychologist to use the term "adolescence" was William H. Burnham in an article he wrote in 1897 for *School Review* titled “Suggestions from the Psychology of Adolescence.” He reviewed the findings of fellow scientists and physicians on the emotional transitions and psychic adjustments of adolescent behaviour, including "intellectual awakening, the storm and stress of doubt... and the intense emotional life..."[5] In keeping with the times, Laura Muntz Lyall (1860–1930) places a young violin player amidst the fused colours of an expressionistic landscape to suggest the awakenings of an adolescent girl. The emotional expression on the girl's face – her mouth slightly open and her eyes looking up – invites the viewer to synesthetically hear the sounds of Romantic music that typically communicate deep feelings of love.

The Child, Land and Nation

Girls in paintings from this era are predominantly situated in a landscape, either picking, holding or appreciating flowers, or sitting in the shade of a tree. This follows the conventions for representing girls created by British artists Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792) and Thomas Gainsborough

Henry Mordecai Rosenberg (1858-1947)
Gathering Firewood

(1727–1788) in the eighteenth century and French artists Adolphe-William Bougereau (1825–1905) and Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919) in the nineteenth, to name only a few who developed this subject. The proximity of flowers and trees implies innocence, chastity, docility and peacefulness, all qualities belonging to an ideal nature. Imbued with these qualities, the pictures motivate the viewer to sympathize with the girl’s pure emotions, to experience the pleasing sensations that come from a carefree childhood and outdoor living, and ultimately, to emulate her virtues.

In Paul Peel's *Blossoms and Butterflies*, the elusive butterflies and delicate flowers signal the child's fleeting nature, even as she is monumentalized in scale in this pastoral setting. In both this painting and Henry Rosenberg's (1858–1947) *Gathering Firewood*, the girls are a constituent part of the landscape, connecting nature with youth, femininity and fertility through their role as gatherers. In Randolph Hewton's picture, the beauty of the fresh spring landscape is reflected in the creamy pink colour of the girl's dress and socks. Comfortably seated on the vibrant green grass, she is like a nymph inhabiting a floral paradise.

Even though elements of Canada's landscape can be found in these paintings of girls, nothing uniquely Canadian characterizes the works. Perhaps *Blossoms and Butterflies* relates to the French countrysid near Paris where Peel pursued art studies and lived until his death at the

too-early age of thirty-one. Rosenberg's *Gathering Firewood*, on the other hand, may take its inspiration from the woods near Chicago, New York or Munich, where he studied and worked before becoming the principal of the Victoria School of Art and Design in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Hewton's picture is possibly even more removed from Canada, given the landscape's resemblance to Japanese and Chinese flower paintings and woodblock prints.

Unquestionably, one of the first artists to depict children in a Canadian environment was the Amsterdam-born, Düsseldorf-trained artist Cornelius Krieghoff (1815–1872), who had a studio in Montreal from the early 1840s until 1853, after which he lived in Quebec City until 1863. Even though *A Pioneer Homestead* exhibits the meticulous detail, subdued colours and Romantic mood typical of the Düsseldorf School, the painting pays close attention to the distinctive character of this French Canadian family, whose members are equally at home in the rural winter landscape. Susan Hiller, an artist and former anthropologist, has argued that, “By definition art is an anthropological practice and anthropology is by definition an art – the role of the artist is to unveil codes not yet articulated within a culture ... to look for new forms known but as yet not understood.”[6] Within this context, Krieghoff shares with the viewer his discovery of how the family survives the bitter climate of a Quebec winter: the use of a sleigh toboggan, a mode of transport invented by the Indigenous peoples of Northeastern Canada; a well that reaches deep below the frozen surface to the spring water that flows underground; a small log cabin with a sloping roof that sheds the weight of heavy snow; and warm outdoor clothing.

In the late nineteenth century a standard way to represent Canadian children was to picture them tobogganing. In *Anticipating Winter Fun*, Charlotte Schreiber (1834–1922), who immigrated to Canada from England after marrying a widower from Toronto, portrays a strong, healthy girl comfortably dressed in winter wear, standing next to her toboggan. She is clearly thriving despite the cold climate, like the red fruit of the tree she keenly observes. Though the child is an English Canadian living in rural Ontario, her clothing is closely associated with French Canadian and Indigenous life. Her tuque has its origins in the hats worn by the French and Métis *coureurs de bois* (fur traders), and the sash tied around her waist was a staple among Indigenous groups, often bartered or offered as a gift by the Hudson’s Bay Company.

The focus on pictures and stories of tobogganing Canadian children survived into the mid-twentieth century, whether the hillside being raced down was near a rural home or in a city park. In *Marjorie's Canadian Winter*

(1893) by author and social reformer Agnes Maule Machar, Marjorie, who lives near New York City, receives a letter that describes the pleasures of a Canadian winter, wherein "the children are wild about outdoor sports." When visiting with Canadian relatives, Marjorie learns to enjoy "the swift gliding over the hard, smooth snow," the "leap down a chute" and the "little sudden descent in the snow" when she tries tobogganing at Montreal’s winter carnival.[7] Robert Pilot's (1898–1967) *The Toboggan Slide, Quebec*, painted over fifty years later, visually expresses the attraction and exuberance of a similar scene.

Despite the popularity of paintings of children at play in winter, some artists sought different ways to explore the Canadian child against the backdrop of cold weather. Kathleen Morris (1893–1986), who specialized in showing horses and sleighs in wintertime, occasionally introduced children into her scenes. In *The Procession*, the vibrant colours of their warm clothing and the surrounding urban buildings are juxtaposed with the snow’s white tonal shadings. The children walk along a cleared path followed by a nun who supervises them, a chapel and houses in the distance peeking through the bare trees. Quebec’s nuns, who were also teachers, played a significant role in the care and education of children before the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s. In contrast to this view of regimentation, *The Peanut Vendor*, also by Morris, shows mothers and children gathering spontaneously around the horse and buggy of the peanut seller, enjoying a delicious treat.

Kathleen Morris (1893-1986)
The Procession (c. 1934)

As for other experiences of Canada, the children's paintings of William Kurelek (1927–1977) and Jean Paul Lemieux (1904–1990) remind us not to see the Canadian child as a homogenous entity. Kurelek's detailed painting of a boy hauling a load of wood embodies the pioneering spirit of life on a Prairie farm during the harsh conditions of a Manitoba winter. Lemieux's French Canadian boy, in comparison, pictured in the vicinity of Quebec City, stands in a wide expanse of land, minimalist in form, that symbolizes the child's feelings of isolation and sadness and at the same time the singular national identity of the French Canadian.

Concluding Remarks

Although the title of this exhibition is *Canadian Art: A Child's World,* we must remember that imagery of childhood is about adult culture. A study of pictures of children tells us a lot about adults, those who make the pictures and those who view them. Yet because the image of the child is a historically changing social construction, these paintings inform our learning about children from Canada's past. The caution is to not interpret them simply as illustrations of a verifiable external reality. Making images presupposes the agency of a creator and the individualized activity of visual inventiveness. Complex, multi-layered meanings are embodied in these pictures of children. The art historian T.J. Clark writes that "astonishing things happen if one gives oneself over to the process of seeing again and again: aspect after aspect of the picture seems to surface, what is salient and what incidental alter bewilderingly from day to day, the larger order of the depiction breaks up, re-crystallizes, fragments again, persists like an afterimage."[8]

Canadian Art: A Child's World invites you to take the time to see these paintings again, and then again, and to become more deeply aware of the history, cultures and methods of production that contributed to these pictures of children by Canadian artists.

Biography

Loren Lerner is Professor of Art History at Concordia University. In 2005, Lerner was curator of *Picturing Her: Images of Girlhood / Salut les filles! La jeune fille en images* at the McCord Museum. This exhibition project led to Lerner's editorship of *Depicting Canada's Children* in 2009. Journal articles and essays from 2007 to 2016 on images of Canada's young people appear in *Rethinking Professionalism: Essays on Women and Art in Canada, 1850-1970, Canadian Children's Literature, Journal of Canadian Art History, Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth, Girlhood Studies, Historical Studies in Education, Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada, Healing the World's Children and Girlhood and the Politics of Place.*

Notes :

1. John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (London: A. and J. Churchill at the Black Swan in Paternoster-row, 1693); Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: or On Education*, 1762, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic-Harper Collins, 1979).

2. John Ruskin, "Sesame and Lilies, Lecture II - Lilies: Of Queens' Gardens," 1865, in *Essays: English and American*, ed. Charles W. Eliot, *The Harvard Classics*, 28 (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909-1917), 72.

3. John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing* with notes by Bernard Dunstan (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 1997).

4. Harriet Mitchell, *Play and Play Materials for the Preschool Child* (Ottawa: Canadian Council on Child and Family Welfare, 1934), 3.

5. William H. Burnham, "Suggestions from the Psychology of Adolescence." *The School Review*, 5, no. 10 (1897): 657.

6. Susan Hiller, *Thinking about Art: Conversations with Susan Hiller*, ed. Barbara Einzig (Manchester University Press 1996), 214.

7. Agnes Maule Machar, *Marjorie's Canadian Winter* (Boston: Lothrop, 1893), 52-53; 246-47.

8. T.J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, 5.

Paul Peel (1860-1892)
The Young Biologist