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Claire Perry. *Young America: Childhood in Nineteenth-Century Art and Culture.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. xi + 235 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10620-6.

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Picturing Childhood

Those of us who study the historical child understand that most of the evidence we have has been created and preserved by adults. As relatively powerless members of society, children and youth leave few traces of their cultures. Diaries, letters, and material artifacts (needlework, woodcarving, and so on) are pretty rare, and social class more than anything else drives their preservation and value. In practice, then, we write the history of childhood, or, to be more precise, we write the history of adult conceptions of childhood rather than the history of children's lives. Still, paintings, drawings, and photographs of children by adults have value in writing the history of adult ideas about childhood, and Perry's book lays before us a tantalizing array of images, some familiar and some not.

This volume accompanied a traveling exhibition that began at Stanford University's Cantor Center for Visual Arts (the collaborating institution–Perry is its curator of American art) in February of 2005, with stops at the Smithsonian and the Portland Museum of Art, ending in January of 2007. The foreword by Cantor's director, Thomas K. Seligman, made me nervous at the outset by claiming that the themes of childhood in these visual images of nineteenth-century childhood "played a pivotal role ... in defining the character of the American people and in setting forth a set of shared values and expectations for the future" (p. viii). Shared values? Oh, no; I thought we had discarded consensus history long ago. Fortunately, Perry has a more nuanced view of the diversity of American children and nowhere in her text does she claim shared values drive these images. At the same time, she understands that one of the ideological functions of these paintings and other images in the nineteenth century was to provide the middle class with an illusion of a shared set of values. Fantasies of childhood served fantasies of national coherence and identity for a young nation. Despite considerable social and economic anxiety throughout the nineteenth century–to say nothing of a Civil War–"paintings, prints and photographs of the nation's children provided the citizenry," writes Perry, "with a sense of an underlying and 'natural' order of American society" (p. 4).

The span of history and range of images and genres force the art historian to organize the images (and the exhibition, one assumes) into "themes," and Perry made good choices. Each chapter surveys the images contributing to a "type"–"The Country Boy," "Daughters of Liberty," "Children of Bondage," "Ragamuffin," "The Papoose," and "The New Scholar." Moreover, she reminds the reader again that this sample of images from the nineteenth century has biases; most images are of and by the middle class (often upper middle class) and mainly reflect the northeastern United States. She also notes threads of "resistance and contradiction" (p. 8), seeing in many of the images "ambiguity, innuendo, and unintended humor that subverted 'official' meanings" (p. 9).

She begins with "the Country Boy," a type of image wholly in keeping with the agrarian myth about the unique strengths of the early republic, a myth soon confronted and contradicted by industrialization and urbanization. There was a tension even in these images, as some paintings presented an idealized agrarian child and others featured the "impertinent and unruly rascals" (p. 13) that Americans see as part of their independent nature. To her credit, in this chapter and elsewhere Perry is less interested in broad surveys of images of a type and more interested in choosing paintings and photographs that capture the tensions and ambivalences American adults had about childhood. Sometimes she gives a single image a more thorough reading, as when she reads Winslow Homer's well-known painting, *Snap the Whip* (1872), for its "visual language of democracy" (p. 30). The chapter on "Daughters of Liberty" contrasts the image of the "risk-taking boy" with that of the "vigilant girl," a dualism reflecting the period's ideology of "separate spheres" for the sexes (p. 35). Male individualistic

competitiveness and material avarice, while important to a developing capitalist nation, needed a counterbalance, and Perry finds in the representations of girlhood an ideology celebrating the stabilizing effect of girls and women, with the rose as an emerging symbol of female qualities. The middle class images avoid depictions of female work other than domestic skills (the photographs of mill girls are an exception). But Perry also detects a tension in the ideology served by these images. The taming of pets, especially the caged bird (also a metaphor in fiction), seems to Perry to stand for the struggle to tame the female will.

It was not just white children who provided symbolic material for the nationalist imaginings of the middle-class consumers of these images. Perry's quite original chapter on "Children of Bondage" offers a close reading of Robert Street's painting, *Children of Commodore John Daniel Daniels* (c. 1826) and the probable nationalist meanings of the two black youths in this family portrait. "The appreciation for unflattering portrayals of African Americans," writes Perry, "evolved into a vehicle for communal solidarity as the nation struggled for cohesion during the nineteenth century" (p. 78). The abolitionists created their own repertory of images of African American children. Demonstrating the ways artists used the images of African American children as "contraband" during the Civil War, Perry reads Winslow Homer's *The Watermelon Boys* (1876) for the complexities of Reconstruction America it captures. Continuing her theme of the tensions within post-emancipation images of African Americans, Perry takes a close look at the work of Henry Ossawa Tanner, an African American painter and student of Thomas Eakins, and finds in Tanner's work a tension between nostalgia and resistance.

Other chapters continue Perry's look at the depictions (for middle-class white people) of other sorts of children in American society. The chapter on the "Ragamuffin" charts the rise of interest in the children of the streets and sees three different sorts of images emerging–some of these waifs seem vicious, some innocent (hence "reformable"), and others actually represent the urban entrepreneur (p. 115). Coded in these images are ideological battles over how Darwinism should be understood in the social realm. The idealized Native American child stands in contrast to these African American and street children, as Perry's chapter on "The Papoose" shows. Finally, the chapter on "The New Scholar" shows how the rise of public education and debates over its functions in a democratic society were reflected in the painting and photography of the century. This chapter folds back to earlier discussions in its attention to Indian schools and schools for black children.

The book ends abruptly with this chapter on schools, so I longed for a summary chapter that would comment on what, finally, this visual evidence adds to our understanding of the tensions in American culture in the nineteenth century and how the picturing of children came to serve the various ideological stances about the meanings of the American democratic nation. I think Perry did an excellent job of demonstrating what new things we learn from examining some well-known and some lesser-known paintings and photographs, but it would be helpful for her to say this clearly in conclusion. I am familiar with many of the images in this book, but not with others; she helped me see new things in the familiar images and introduced me to some images I did not know.

The genres missing for me in this book probably never had a chance of being included in the first place, given the high-art institutional origins of this project and exhibition. Perry includes a little bit of popular imagery with an occasional look at the Currier and Ives prints, and she could not ignore the Jacob Riis photographs in her look at images of street children (though Riis's photographs do not seem to fit the "high" and "popular" art categories–they represent the emergence of social documentary photography). What I have in mind are the two photographic genres–the stereoview and the snapshot–common in the middle-class home by the 1880s, genres full of images of children. Perry was not attempting to make a definitive, exhaustive survey of images of children in the nineteenth-century United States, and many images had to be excluded, but once she opened the door to some popular images she should have given the reader and viewer just a taste of the children we see in stereoviews. This omission aside, the book rewards the reader and makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the history of adult ideas about children.

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