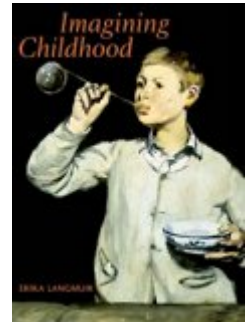


**Erika Langmuir.** *Imagining Childhood*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. 256 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-10131-7.



**Reviewed by** Loren Lerner

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*Imagining Childhood* is a selective survey of images of children in Western art. The book's author, Erika Langmuir, is an art historian who is interested in the meaning, purpose, and sources of images, and the migration of images through time and from one geographic region to another. Focusing mainly on Classical Antiquity, Renaissance Italy, and Dutch and Flemish Europe (with some examples from Spain, France, Britain and the United States), Langmuir's emphasis is on iconography: the identification, description, and interpretation of the content of images. Arguing that critics' interpretation of depictions of children as evidence of social attitudes and conditions could lead to misinterpretations, Langmuir's objective is to examine the relative autonomy of images and the persistence of religious and cultural symbols in works of art. As the author clearly states, the aim of this book is "not to primarily deduce attitudes to childhood from pictorial evidence, but to examine the imagery of childhood for what it tells us about the uses of images" (p. 14). As such, her approach rests firmly in the tradition of art historians Erwin Panofsky, Aby Warburg, and Fritz Saxl, who were concerned with

the study of classical tradition in post-classical art and culture, and in particular with the transmission of themes from Classical Antiquity to the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

The arrangement of *Imagining Childhood*, which embraces this iconographical perspective, does not correspond to periods or movements. Rather, it is topical, shifting back and forth through the history of art to demonstrate the evolution of images that originate primarily in classical sources. The emphasis is on painting, but book illustrations, votive offerings, funeral objects, and devotional and didactic prints are also well represented. The book's introduction, titled "Mainly About Parents," sets the tone. Langmuir convincingly argues that the idea of ideal parenting as a public virtue (disseminated through French and German almanacs, and adopted by artists such as Daniel Nikolaus Chodowiecki, Albrecht Durer and Peter Paul Rubens) echoes back to a single passage written by the second-century Greek historian and essayist Plutarch in *Parallel Lives*, also known as *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*.

*Imagining Childhood* is divided into three parts. Part 1, "The Vulnerable Child," consists of three chapters: "Protection," "Innocent Victims," and "Mourning and Consolation." In the first, Langmuir shows that the creation of visual artifacts was significantly influenced by children's mortality due to sickness, accident, violence, and war. Numerous images from the earliest times document parents' attempts to guard their children from danger and, after a child died, how they mourned, consoled themselves, and commemorated the death. Linking sources from classical and pre-classical mythology, Christian theology, and humanist writings, Langmuir reveals interesting and unusual associations. By connecting Saint Augustine of Hippo's (AD 354-430) act of saving a child with Simone Martini's *Beato Agostino Novello* altarpiece (1324) and an amulet of Horus-the-child from Pharoanic Egypt, she illustrates how generations of vulnerable infants were placed under the protection of supernatural beings with whom they were somehow identified. The preponderance of images of the Virgin and Child in homes and churches and on cemetery tombstones speaks to the Virgin's role as protector of children, a role that stems from Isis and other Ancient gods. From the Bronze Age to the late 1800s, portraits of young children attest to their vulnerability in the first years of life and the need to secure for them divine protection.

In sharp contrast, the second chapter, "Innocent Victims," explores images from the Christian era that depict the deliberate murder of children by adults. Representations deriving from the biblical Massacre of the Innocents, found on sarcophagi and in prayer books, altarpieces, and paintings (one example is the rendition by Pieter Bruegel the Elder [c. 1565-67]), were conceived to incite horror, compassion, and the contemplation of Christian values. The slaughter of children was also used, albeit less explicitly, in secular works, though still with alarming effects. Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), commissioned by the Spanish government for the 1937 World's Fair in Paris,

employs the motif of an anguished mother weeping over her dead child to arouse pity and anger at the town's bombing by the Germans. Langmuir also introduces rare depictions of violence inflicted by mothers, including infanticide, which is usually associated with external causes. In William Hogarth's engraving *Gin Lane* (1750-52), the craving for cheap gin induces a mother to forget that she is nursing her baby, allowing it to plunge over the banister to its death. Later in the chapter, Langmuir considers cultural differences in the adaptation of images of poor, abandoned, and orphaned youth. For example, England's Victorians often showed such children receiving charity and being taught to work, whereas American artists preferred an optimistic or hypocritical approach, portraying the endangered child as a happy-go-lucky urchin in tune with the entrepreneurial American spirit.

In chapter 3, "Mourning and Consolation," Langmuir reveals how Greco-Roman funerary monuments with their mythological subjects and portraits of dead children often set the template for later commemorations. The idealizing idiom of antiquity can be found in seventeenth-century portraits by Flemish artist Nicolaes Maes of little boys cast in the role of Ganymede. The author also explores the theme of situating the deceased among the living, using an atypical example, *Mourning Picture* (c. 1889) by the American naïf painter Edwin Romanzo Elmer. This surreal vision depicts Elmer's daughter standing on the front lawn of her Victorian home, at a distance from her parents, her pet lamb by her side. Further along, the author's discussion of *Saint Francis Resuscitating the Notary's Son* (1485), Ghirlandaio's altarpiece in Florence, is enlightening in that it explores how the miracle relates to the death of Sassetti's son and, around the same time, the birth of a second son.

Part 2 is titled "Stages of Childhood" and begins with the chapter "'The Vilest State of Human Nature': Swaddled infancy." Here Langmuir exam-

ines the Christ Child and the Nativity to reveal how the scene of a radiant naked child venerated by the Virgin Mary, so typical of Renaissance painting, was inspired by the revelations of the fourteenth-century Swedish mystic Saint Bridget. Variations on this image that focus on the swaddling cloth, a symbol of Christ's imprisonment in his earthly body, can be seen in Georges de la Tour's *The New Born Child* (1648), popular emblem books, and paintings of Dutch domestic interiors.

The following chapter, "The First Steps and the Baby-Walker," introduces a two-inch-long bronze figurine of a crawling baby from the Minoan period. Langmuir compares the motif of crawling babies, so popular in Greek art, with Vincent Van Gogh's *The First Step* (1890), a painting based on a drawing by Millet that, in turn, was inspired by seventeenth-century Dutch paintings. She also traces the image of the baby-walker, often the signifier of the second stage of human life, from a Roman child's sarcophagus to the medieval schemata of the Ages of Man and the devotional imagery of the life of Christ. Included in the discussion is Hieronymous Bosch's child with a walker and a whirligig (late fifteenth century) on the left wing of his early triptych of *Christ Carrying the Cross*, which has puzzled many scholars and most probably represents the Christ Child.

In Chapter 6, "'Better to Keep Still': Playful Childhood and Adult Laughter," Langmuir relates that, despite the fact that many children worked from a young age, childhood (or *pueritia*) was often associated with toys and play, and the characteristics of playfulness, mobility, and emotional volatility. Pictures of children regularly offered up different types of laughter, from the playful tots found in Greco-Roman vase paintings and late medieval and Renaissance art, which were aimed at amusing adults, to seventeenth-century didactic emblem books and Pieter Bruegel's *Children's Games* (1560), which mocks childish human folly and the futility of play.

Chapter 7, titled "Jean qui pleure et Jean qui rit", and "As the Old Have Sung So Pipe the Young," looks at how Dutch seventeenth-century artists like Frans Hal, Jan Molenaer, Judith Leyster and Jan Steen showed a greater range of expressions on children's faces with pictures of children grinning at the viewer and with contrasts of tearful and joyful children. Langmuir explains that the imagery of contrasting emotions, so popular in the seventeenth century, was invented in the Renaissance and owed its origin to the ancient Greek philosophers Heraclitus and Democritus, who saw these emotions as converse responses to the human condition. Jacob Jordaens created the genre imagery with his illustration of the proverb "As the old have sung, so pipe the young," which represents the passing of folly from one generation to the next. Many versions of this subject by Jordaens and his follower Jan Steen reverse the role of the child and adult, depicting three generations around a table playing music, the parents and grandparents behaving foolishly and transferring these mores to their offspring.

Part 3, "Miniature Adults," contains only one chapter, titled "Children's Dynastic Portraits." Here Langmuir considers portraits of royal children by the artists Titian, Lucas Cranach, Hans Holbein the Younger, Velazquez, Anthony Van Dyck, Johan Zoffany, and Laurits Tuxen, some of whom worked and lived at the royal court with the intention of producing portraits of the monarch's families. By the sixteenth century, these artists had recaptured and even surpassed the Greco-Roman mastery at portraying childlike children, even though courtly ideals of poise and expression limited pictorial strategies.

"Bubbles" is the title of the conclusion, which ends with an analysis of *Bubbles* (1886) by John Everett Millais, as well as interpretations of the subject by Caspar Netscher, Salvator Rosa, Jan Steen, Jean-Siméon Chardin and Edouard Manet. This theme, Langmuir points out, stems from a pictorial image of transience that originated in

the Renaissance and illustrated the ancient Latin maxim, *homo bulla*, as it was revived by Erasmus in his *Adages* of 1500. Millais's painting is a portrait of his grandson, originally exhibited under the title *A Child's World* (1886). The portrait was not meant to suggest the perils of childhood and early death, but the carefree charm of childhood. When *Bubbles* was popularized in an advertisement for Pears soaps, a controversy followed about the use of images of children. Millais was angered by the soapy undertones of the image, although he had given permission to reproduce his painting within that context. The ensuing debates about the autonomy of art and the influence of commerce on public taste brought to the fore serious concerns that are still deeply felt today.

*Imagining Childhood* had its beginnings in the 1980s in an interdisciplinary course the author taught on images of childhood at the University of Sussex in the School of Cultural and Community Studies. As the only art historian on her team, she concentrated on classical Greece and Rome, and her emphasis on the origins of images of children in Classical Antiquity is one of the major contributions of this book. In fact, her work is an important reminder of the persistent influence of classical sources through most of Europe's history, and of the fact that an understanding of Classical literature and art was imperative in the academic training of artists. Langmuir's methodology also encourages insights into the relationship between form and content. Given her extensive knowledge of the history of painting, she easily investigates and discovers the meaning of visual parallels. In Eugene Delacroix's *Medea* (1818), Langmuir shows how the figure, derived from a sixteenth-century engraving of the Massacre of the Innocents, reflects the composition of Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks* (1503-06) to emphasize the vast difference between Christian ideology and pagan infanticide.

One of the significant findings of Langmuir's study is that images of children lend themselves

to allegory and, as such, may accumulate not only different but contradictory meanings. In Philipp Otto Runge's *Portrait of the Artist's Parents* (1806), the author uncovers how the children represent a Life Force, a new dawn, Resurrection, natural affection, a cyclical view of the world indebted to Classical Antiquity, Christian ideas, and Plutarch's view of parental attitudes, which had long since entered Western thought.

*Imagining Childhood* is a major achievement, the first monograph of its kind to advance an extensive history of the images of children. Better still, the text is engaging, with abundant fascinating insights. Langmuir, formerly head of education at the National Gallery in London, knows how to talk directly about images, mining the visual details to discover more about the meaning of the work. As co-author of the *Yale Dictionary of Art and Artists* (2000), she is proficient at succinctly securing the major facts in this encyclopedic coverage of the material, which includes 165 reproductions, many in color. *Imagining Childhood* can be approached in different ways, as an introductory survey or a reference point to further investigations of the many findings that Langmuir has consolidated successfully in this text.

Nevertheless, *Imagining Childhood* will be criticized for what Langmuir chose not to discuss: evidence from socio-historic sources about the actual conditions in which children lived and died. Many scholars will also be surprised by other deliberate omissions; for example, paintings of children by Thomas Gainsborough and Sir Joshua Reynolds, which are usually considered pivotal in visualizing the Romantic child, are given cursory treatment. In fact, Langmuir devotes one line to Reynolds's and Gainsborough's "fancy pictures" of beggar and cottage children. While these painters influenced the taste of late eighteenth-century art collectors, who favoured soulful, melancholic children, the Irish-born artist William Mulready, Langmuir argues, was more important for his

childhood scenes and for his interpretations of children's facial expressions and imitative behaviors.

Further, while Langmuir devotes a chapter to "Innocent Victims," the more obvious concept of the child as purely innocent, which dates back to the late seventeenth-century writings of philosophers John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, is absent from this study. One could argue that if Classical philosophers like Homer, Petrarch, and Democritus have been included in this discussion, then Locke's idea of the child as a *tabula rasa* and Rousseau's treatise on the education of the child as a "natural man" deserve at least a passing mention. On the other hand, the concept of the Romantic child in art has already been considered elsewhere, and perhaps Langmuir is suggesting that its relevance has been somewhat overstated. Robert Rosenblum's *The Romantic Child from Runge to Sendak* (1998) looks at the romanticized vision of children in paintings and book illustrations as observed reality and allegorical symbol. In *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (1998), Anne Higonnet investigates the concept of the inherently innocent child, in both body and mind, that was confirmed in the public's imagination with the portrait paintings of British artists Reynolds and Gainsborough as well as Sir Thomas Lawrence, Sir Henry Raeburn, and John Hoppner. Higonnet explains that the emphasis on the child's body in the mass production of illustrations and photographs, beginning in the late nineteenth century, led to the transformation of the Romantic child into the "knowing child" possessed of a more complex, ambiguous and problematic constellation of attributes. *Picturing Children: Constructions of Childhood between Rousseau and Freud* (2002), edited by Marilyn R. Brown, begins in the late nineteenth century (where Langmuir's book ends) and looks at artists Gustave Courbet, Jacques Henri Latrigue, Oskar Kokoschka, Edouard Manet, Auguste Renoir, and Egon Schiele to reveal how modern images of

childhood coalesce with the concept of childhood begun by Rousseau.

One could also say that Langmuir is ignoring other important themes such as the sinful child as discussed by Eric Jozef Ziolkowski in *Evil Children in Religion, Literature, and Art* (2001). Perhaps she could also be reproached for only addressing the visual imagery of Roman ruling-class children and not the non-Roman children that Jeannine Diddle Uzzi ponders in *Children in the Visual Arts of Imperial Rome* (2005). Furthermore, very few American artists are included in Langmuir's text, possibly because American children are the subject of Claire Perry's *Young America: Childhood in Nineteenth-Century Art and Culture* (2006), another Yale University Press publication. These kinds of criticisms that arise when an author selects some themes over others are only typical. Regardless of any objections, Langmuir's well-researched book, with its innovative reasoning and wealth of sources, is a landmark study, encouraging scholars to continue to research images of children to more fully comprehend their rich diversity and far-reaching significance.

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