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Programme of Study: BA Illustration

Module: ADAD4019

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Word Count: 1591

The Representation of Childhood Throughout History in Art

The exhibition will have a focus on how childhood has been represented through art throughout history. According to Gray, “anthropologists have... observed two cultures, the adults' culture and the children's culture. The two cultures, of course, are not completely independent of one another” (2016). The chosen paintings for the exhibition will explore how the culture of childhood has evolved in the perception of adults and understand how a modern perception of childhood evolved throughout history.

The term ‘childhood’ can be subjective as everyone has unique experiences of growing up, so it is important to set a guideline for what this exhibition views as a normal or good childhood. A set of laws or rights would be best to quantify this as it is without bias and can be held to any individual, regardless of their background. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, or UNCRC, is the basis of all Unicef's work. The convention came into force in the UK in 1992 (Unicef, no date) and has 54 articles that cover a wide range of aspects of a child's life, with a child defined as someone who is under the age of 18, found in article 1 of the UNCRC. These include civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights that every child is entitled to. Some articles in the UNCRC which apply more directly to the exhibition are as follows: the right to be heard (article 12); the right to education (article 28) the right to leisure, play and culture (article 31); the right to protection from child labour (article 32) (Unicef, no date). These specific articles can be seen to be non-existent throughout history in many cultures up until recently or may still be a challenge in some countries. The exhibition will aim to highlight how these rights have been ignored to cause purposeful harm to children and also reveal how ignorant cultures were to the needs of children in the past. By highlighting how much children's rights have improved

throughout history, the exhibition will then shed light on how these rights are continuing to be ignored in many developing countries. This will present these particular ideals as 'old fashioned' and 'backwards' and encourage people to see what actions can be taken to grant children these rights in countries where they aren't in place.



Madonna with Child and two angels, Duccio di Buoninsegna (1284).

Largely the only depiction of children in art before the 17th century was baby Jesus. According to Edwards (2015) "Medieval portraits of children were usually commissioned by churches. And that made the range of subjects limited to Jesus and a few other biblical babies." Philippe Aries also notes in his book 'Childhood through the Centuries' that "the touching idea of childhood remained limited to the Infant Jesus" (1996, p.33). A present day audience would make the observation that babies painted during Medieval times typically look like small adults. This is thought to be because of an idea called homunculus (Edwards, 2015), which means 'little man'. It is more commonly used to describe that someone is unchanged and fully formed. This was popular in paintings of Jesus because artists were not just painting an infant child, but a being who was already an all-knowing God who had wisdom beyond his years (Mann, 2020). Worshippers in churches wanted to be comforted

by these paintings that their prayers could be answered, and an innocent looking baby could not represent the idea that artists and churches wanted (Edwards, 2015).



Sir Anthony van Dyck, Princess Elizabeth, 1635 - 1650 and Princess Anne, 1637 - 1640. Daughters of Charles I, 1637 and The Five Eldest Children of Charles (1637)

In the mid-17th century portraits of children were exclusive to Royalty and aristocracy. Court artists were popular at this time, and it was also in the 17th century that more realistic depictions of children came about “As portraiture expanded, people wanted their babies to look like cute babies instead of ugly adult homunculi” (Edwards, 2015). This can be observed in Sir Anthony van Dyck’s *The Five Eldest Children of Charles* (1637), where he produced preparatory sketches of Princess Elizabeth and Princess Anne before executing the formal painting (National Galleries Scotland, no date). The is more intimate and lacks the formality of the larger portrait, showing more childhood innocence rather than the grandeur of royalty. According to National Galleries Scotland, “Court artists had the tricky task of expressing royal children's 'childishness', but also preserving their status”. However, the Royal Collection trusts notes about the formal portrait “Van Dyck’s masterful painting acknowledges both the youth and the status of its royal subjects, breaking with the earlier

tradition of presenting royal children as miniature adults” (no date). According to National Galleries Scotland (no date) both Elizabeth and Anne died young of tuberculosis, Elizabeth aged 15 and Anne aged 3. This goes in line with Aries theory on why children were largely absent from art- the high mortality rate of infants and children. He noted “the general feeling was, and for a long time remained, that one had several children in order to keep just a few” (1996, p.36).



Jan Steen 'A School for Boys and Girls' (1670)

According to National Galleries Scotland (no date), by the 17th century there were different depictions of children arising in art aside from portraits. For example, Jan Steen's painting 'A School for Boys and Girls' (1670) depicts unruly children- perhaps a more accurate depiction of the behaviour of children (National Galleries Scotland, no date). This coincided with the new concept of learning and developing being a key part of childhood (National Galleries Scotland, no date). Phillippe Aries references in his book 'Childhood through the Centuries' (1996) Abbé Goussault, who wrote in 1693 “They (meaning children) are young plants which need tending and watering frequently: a few words of advice offered at the right moment, a few marks of friendship and affection given now and then, touch them and bind them” (1996, p.62). Both the painting (Jan Steen, 1670) and the words of Abbé Goussault show that a more recognisable concept of childhood was being formed in

the 17th century, and this was reflected in its art. It was in the 17th century that articles 28 and 31 of the UNCRC, the right to education and play and leisure, can be seen (Unicef, no date).



Lewis Hine (One of many children working in Carolina cotton mills, 1908)

Lewis Hine was a photographer born in 1874 who used his photography to bring attention to social issues in America (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020). One issue he highlighted was child labour. According to The Guardian (2018) “His shocking images – from the cotton mills of Carolina to the coal breakers in Pennsylvania – helped bring about child labour laws”. In 1908, he was commissioned by the National Child Labour Committee to document child labourers working across America. One photo, titled ‘One of the many children working in Carolina cotton mills’ (1908) brought about the Fair Labour Standards act 1938. Although this photograph reveals that article 32 of UNCRC (the right to protection from child labour) (Unicef, no date) wasn’t being upheld at the beginning of the 20th century, it can also be seen that as a result of Lewis Hine and his photographs positive change was brought about to childhoods in America (The Guardian, 2018).

I have chosen the indoor soft playground 'Playzone' as the venue for the exhibition. I have chosen a children's play area because it gives one key example of childhood- the right to play and have fun. The facility would not be closed for the exhibition. It would remain open, so that in theory the venue would be filled with children playing in the multi-tiered play area. The paintings and artworks would be displayed inside the play area on different levels, with the earliest paintings on the ground floor and the latest paintings on the upper levels. Having the venue in playzone would not only illicit feelings of childhood and give an example of children having fun, but it would also encourage the adult viewer of the exhibition to gain the perspective of a child. They might have to duck around certain areas of the play area, as it is not intended for adult heights, and this would physically change their perspective. They might be pushed around and be crowded by children. They might contrast the way these children are with the children in the paintings. There would be some level of physical exertion. Certain obstacles like slides and ball pits would encourage the adult viewers to act a little more immaturely. They might recall their own childhood experiences and might engage in juvenile activities like playing on the obstacle courses and going down the slides. All this would be in an effort to contrast the earlier paintings of 'incomplete adults' to present day children. Adults let out their inner immaturity as they scramble around playzone.

In the exploration of these artworks a lot has been gained from investigating the culture and society surrounding them. It could be said that the society that the artists were living in at the time of painting is more important in understanding how childhood has evolved than the paintings themselves. Artworks provide a tainted reflection of the world it depicts as it is mingled with societal pressures and the artists' own perception of childhood.

Therefore, it has been vital to explore childhood from a historical perspective as well as an artistic one to see how the concept of childhood means what it does today.

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