



Fig. 1. François de Troy, *Presumed Portrait of Madame de Franqueville and Her Children*, 1712, oil on canvas, 138.5 x 163.4 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 2. William-Adolphe Bouguereau, *Crown of Flowers*, 1884, oil on canvas, 162.9 x 89.9 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 3. William Brymner, *Girl with a Dog, Lower Saint Lawrence*, 1905, oil on canvas, 48.5 x 60.5 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

## Girlhood Innocence and Nature in the Nineteenth Century

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The concept of childhood emerged in the eighteenth century as society began to recognize that a child was not simply a small adult but in a stage of development with unique characteristics.<sup>1</sup>

The notion that children are innocents was advanced by English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) and French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). 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 depends on their education through appropriate lessons and experience. Rousseau's premise is that man is by nature good and that society and civilization corrupt this goodness; it is only through a proper education that "natural man" can come into being. Focusing on François de Troy's (1645–1730) *Presumed Portrait of Madame de Franqueville and Her Children* (1712) (fig. 1), William-Adolphe Bouguereau's (1825–1905) *Crown of Flowers* (1884) (fig. 2) and William Brymner's (1855–1925) *Girl with a Dog, Lower Saint Lawrence* (1905) (fig. 3), this essay will examine how modern conceptions of childhood spurred a shift away from representing girls and women as alike and inspired artistic images of girls in natural settings that emphasize their innocence.

Prior to Locke's and Rousseau's influential writings on childhood, paintings and sculptures of children usually presented them as miniature versions of adults. For example, in Troy's *Presumed Portrait of Madame de Franqueville and Her Children*,<sup>2</sup> Madame de Franqueville is surrounded by her son and her two daughters, who, despite appearing significantly smaller than

their mother, are dressed in similar gowns as her. Although the petite size of the child on the far left suggests that she is very young, her opulent royal blue dress lends her a mature appearance.



Fig. 1. François de Troy, *Presumed Portrait of Madame de Franqueville and Her Children*, 1712, oil on canvas, 138.5 x 163.4 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Locke's and Rousseau's perspectives on childhood strongly influenced eighteenth- and nineteenth-century genre paintings of young girls, which were popular throughout Europe and North America.<sup>3</sup> These images illustrate the innocence of their subjects in various ways, such as by dressing them up in bygone costumes to make them seem timeless, or by placing them in a country setting to suggest they live in harmony with nature. In Bouguereau's *Crown of Flowers*, two young girls in peasant clothing are enjoying a moment of leisure in a rural landscape.



Fig. 2. William Bouguereau, *Crown of Flowers*, 1884, oil on canvas, 162.9 x 89.9 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Bouguereau was an influential French academic painter who produced a large body of works encompassing historical and biblical subjects, portraits and genre paintings.<sup>4</sup> Unlike his contemporaries such as Edgar Degas (1834–1917) and Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919), who were at the forefront of Impressionism, Bouguereau’s paintings—which often depicted the female human body—were rendered in the classical traditions of Greek and Roman art. As early as 1851, Bouguereau shifted his attention towards creating more intimate and simpler compositions “in which sentiment took the place of narrative.”<sup>5</sup> In *Crown of Flowers*, the older of the two girls is standing behind the other, arranging a crown of flowers on the younger girl’s head. The young girl is lifting her apron to hold the pile of flowers being used to assemble the crown. The two barefooted figures are dressed in typical peasant clothing, including an apron, white shirt or blouse and solid-coloured overdresses. Their garments resemble costumes, as they lack signs of the typical wear and tear that result from manual labour. One could describe them

as “picturesque rags,” a means of showing off the artist’s skill in painting textiles and of enhancing the overall aesthetic of the painting. The clean feet of the peasant girls provide further evidence of the artist’s idealization of his subjects. The natural landscape serves as a theatrical backdrop within the composition. The background is “broadly brushed,”<sup>6</sup> producing a blurry effect that imitates an out-of-focus photograph. The viewer’s attention is directed towards the younger girl, whose eyes appear to look out towards the viewer but are lowered to suggest her shy and modest disposition.

This idealized image of childhood appealed to middle- and upper-class adult viewers by provoking sentimental feelings of nostalgia. The young girl’s gaze in *Crown of Flowers* suggests that she is aware of the viewer and their experience of “what it is like to be a child absorbed in one’s self” in looking at her.<sup>7</sup> Not only is the girl aware of this experience, but she is also the cause of it. Her body, by virtue of its youth, provokes nostalgia as well as sorrow in the viewer, who is reminded that, like the flowers of her crown, childhood innocence inevitably withers away.

The connection between children and nature is also portrayed in Canadian artist William Brymner’s *Girl with a Dog, Lower Saint Lawrence*, in which a girl is sitting on a ground of dirt while a ship sails down the Saint Lawrence River in the background. She is wearing a straw hat with a dark-coloured ribbon around it and a white long sleeve blouse under her pink pinafore dress, and is carrying a long stick in her right hand.



Fig. 3. William Brymner, *Girl with a Dog, Lower Saint Lawrence*, 1905, oil on canvas, 48.5 x 60.5 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The girl's pure nature is conveyed through the delicate fabric and soft colours of her clothing. Although she appears calm, the dog's presence alludes to her playful nature. The artist's brushstrokes and neutral colour palette allow the girl to blend in with the natural landscape, suggesting a harmonious relationship between the child and nature.

The nineteenth century was a time of social upheaval, as social and economic forces brought changes to the traditional family unit. Economic wealth and power were shifting away from the aristocracy towards the emerging entrepreneurial class, and there was an influx of people from the countryside to the cities. As the Romantic idea of childhood innocence pervaded Western Europe and North America, images of children in rural landscapes—such as Bouguereau's *Crown of Flowers* and Brymner's *Girl with a Dog, Lower Saint Lawrence*—helped adult viewers to forget about the onerous aspects of adult society by recollecting their childhood. In contrast to works such as Troy's *Presumed Portrait of Madame de Franqueville and Her Children*, these

pictures reflect an emerging understanding of children as uncorrupted beings who are fundamentally different from adults. However, the pensive expressions of the young girls in Bouguereau's and Brymner's works foreshadow the eventual loss of childhood innocence, provoking both nostalgia and sorrow.

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Green, *French Paintings of Childhood and Adolescence, 1848-1886* (Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Loren Lerner, "Innocence," in *Girl Culture: An Encyclopedia*, vol. 2., ed. Claudia A. Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), 365–68.

<sup>3</sup> Artists who painted such genre scenes include Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792), Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788), Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller (1793–1865), John Everett Millais (1829–1896), Kate Greenaway (1846–1901) and Paul Peel (1860–1892).

<sup>4</sup> Fronia E. Wissman, *Bouguereau* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1996), 10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>7</sup> Green, 3.

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