



Fig. 1. Henri Baron Leys, *Charity*, 1850,
oil on panel, 62.5 x 45.1 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 2. Théodule Ribot, *A Young Vendean*, 1863,
oil on canvas, 56.5 x 47 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 3. Fernand Pelez, *Street Child*, 1880,
oil on canvas, 95.3 x 79.1 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Images of Poor and Destitute Boys in Nineteenth-Century Painting

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This exhibition essay covers the development of childhood imagery and social engagement in the second half of the nineteenth century within the context of the modern construction of childhood. The lives of poor children became a popular theme in art during this era, motivated not only by the spread of child labour in the often miserable conditions of rapidly urbanizing and industrialized cities,¹ but also by the French Revolutions of 1830 and 1848 which were precipitated by mass poverty. Images of struggling and suffering children proliferated, including Henri Leys's (1815–1869) *Charity* (1850) (fig. 1), Théodule Ribot's (1823–1891) *A Young Vendean* (1863) (fig. 2) and Fernand Pelez's (1848–1913) *Street Child* (1880) (fig. 3).

Leys was a Belgian artist who was strongly influenced by French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712–1778) Romantic nationalism, a cultural movement that focused on local customs and traditions. Leys thus produced idealized historical representations of Belgian society, such as *Charity*. Here a poor peasant child, joined by two women family members, is extending his hand to receive alms from a luxuriously dressed lady who is accompanied by a page. This scene appears to be taking place at the walled entrance of the city's ancient fortifications. Although it is difficult to define the exact location, the viewer can see through the archway a house with a Flemish gable, some typical contemporary Belgian and Netherlandish architectural motifs and a Romanesque church. This painting is typical of Leys's moralistic scenes of the everyday lives of the common people. He was a great admirer of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Flemish genre painting, and as such, *Charity* and many of his other works are set in Flanders in the sixteenth century, when Belgium was one of the

major cultural and economic hubs of Europe.



Fig. 1. Henri Baron Leys, *Charity*, 1850, oil on panel, 62.5 x 45.1 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Public opinion on the giving of alms varied: for some, it was a sign of honour (e.g. images of emperors giving alms), while for others it was an act of mockery by the rich. Leys's painting, however, draws on the traditional Christian understanding of this kind of street charity as a righteous gesture. In *Charity*, the woman is giving alms to a child as a merciful benefactress, while the two women from the boy's family exhibit obedience and humility. The older woman modestly casts her eyes down, lightly bending and encouraging the child to take alms, while the younger woman raises her eyes to God, her hands clasped in a thankful prayer. The young page is pensively observing this act of charitable giving. Leys's *Charity* is intended to remind the viewer that if one behaves generously and mercifully towards others, regardless of their social status, one will win the same grace from God, for "all are equal in the eye of the Lord" (Acts 10:34–35).

The idealized character of *Charity* is enhanced by its picturesque style, which emphasizes the warm, ochre-based colours of the fabrics—including satin, brocade, furs and linen—and the architectural setting. The multiple and wide light surfaces are highlighted by the black contours of the dresses and their deep folds. Leys intentionally uses visually appealing, intense and diverse colours with many tonal contrasts, reminiscent of the paintings by Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863) and Paul Delaroche (1797–1856) that he saw when he was in Paris. In this visual response to enlightened philosophy and social revolution in the name of human equality, the artist conveys the patriotism of the era by imbuing his work with lofty notions of an ideal civic society.²

Another painting that explores the social circumstances of youth is *A Young Vendean*, one of a number of paintings of Vendean by French artist Théodule Ribot.



Fig. 2. Théodule Ribot, *A Young Vendean*, 1863, oil on canvas, 56.5 x 47 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Ribot was inspired by the figurative realism of Dutch, Spanish and Italian Baroque painters like Jusepe de Ribera (1591–1652), Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606–1669) and

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610). *A Young Vendean* is a full-length portrait of an adolescent, with equal attention paid to his working attire and attentive expression, conveyed by his slightly pursed lower lip. These elements, along with the boy's stooped posture, stand out against the almost uniform, dark background. The subject projects a businesslike attitude as his hand searches his pocket, yet there is also a sense of desperation in his eyes. He has already reached the age when most working-class children worked in factories and workhouses or made a living by brigandage. Although the boy is not looking at the viewer, his gaze attracts attention, revealing a stubborn and persistent personality.

This boy may be alone but he knows how to survive in a city. Indeed, the title of the painting, *A Young Vendean*, situates his origins in the Vendée, where tens of thousands of Republicans, civilians and sympathizers were massacred during the French Revolution (1789–99). This reference reveals the revolutionary legacy that this young, independent man is to carry on. Painted in a frank and noble manner, this work presents a working-class man who is fully aware of life's value and who constitutes a vital part of society. Unlike the imagined grace and humility of the poor medieval family, reliant on the charity of the rich in Leys's depiction of Belgian society, *A Young Vendean* is a portrait of an adolescent boy striving for the social emancipation of the worker in nineteenth-century France.

In contrast to this independent young man, Pelez, a Spanish artist who worked in Paris, depicts an abandoned child forced to turn to begging and thievery in order to survive in *Street Child*.



Fig. 3. Fernand Pelez, *Street Child*, 1880, oil on canvas, 95.3 x 79.1 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Pelez's realist works diverge from the idealized pictures of Seville ragamuffins by the Spanish painter Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617–1682), a pioneering figure in the representation of street children whose works were popular among the northern European public.³ Pelez's paintings depict the grittiness of the street lives of children who have lost their childhood. In *Street Child*, a young boy who is about five years old is passing the time by idly sitting on the bare ground and smoking. To his right there are some scattered slivers which he might use for producing matches. In the nineteenth century, matches were made primarily by the poor, disabled and the young, and selling matches went hand-in-hand with begging.⁴ The empathetic artist has portrayed the boy in *Street Child* almost at a right angle, slightly from above, representing the view of a passerby. Similar to many of Pelez's other young male subjects, he is dressed in dirty and torn rags, and sits on the ground in front of a barren grey wall.

Pelez's realist pictures of poor and destitute children address the fact that “in most large

French towns probably over 60 per cent of abandoned children were illegitimate” in the late nineteenth century.⁵ The stigma of illegitimacy was a part of this modern misery, and together with the eighteenth-century invention of childhood as a distinct stage of life, it fueled a great deal of fine art and literature devoted to the subject of the impoverished child.⁶ Furthermore, Paris was the fifth most important industrial city and third most demanding in terms of the factory labour of children between the ages of eight and twelve.⁷ Children under eight were legally protected from working, and to ensure this law was respected “a salaried inspectorate was set up.”⁸ Thus, the occupation of abandoned children under the age of eight varied from begging to selling flowers, or, like the boy in Pelez’s painting, making matches. The straight angle and the simplicity of the picture of this ragamuffin make Pelez’s portrayal as frank as possible, exposing the truth of the difficult circumstances of street children to the Parisian viewers of this painting.⁹

In addressing the contemporary social problem of poor and destitute children, Leys, Ribot and Pelez actively helped shape public understanding of the indigent classes, which was an issue that was a part of the social changes of the nineteenth century and the cause of major liberal reforms in France, Belgium and across Europe.¹⁰ Leys’s *Charity*, Ribot’s *A Young Vendean* and Pelez’s *Street Child* are examples of differing attitudes towards poverty-stricken children, ranging from the idealistic view of a poor peasant family and the generosity of a land owner in *Charity* to the noble image of a streetwise Vendean and the realist representation of a beggar in *Street Child*. All three touch upon the social reality of the rapidly urbanizing Western countries of the nineteenth century and attempt to elicit emotional responses in the viewer. Although this imagery was inspired by a specific historical moment, the subject of impoverished children persists in contemporary art—a testament to humankind’s ongoing struggle with global poverty.¹¹

NOTES

¹ During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, urbanization resulted from and contributed to industrialization. New job opportunities in the cities spurred the mass movement of surplus populations away from the countryside. See “Human Population: Urbanization,” Population Reference Bureau, accessed December 5, 2015, <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Lesson-Plans/HumanPopulation/Urbanization.aspx>.

² Sibylle Valcke, “Leys, Henri,” Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online, last modified August 2014, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/public/>.

³ Claire Perry, *Young America: Childhood in 19th-Century Art and Culture* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press), 162.

⁴ “Sulphur Matches: Brimstone matches for the tinderbox,” accessed December 5, 2015, <http://www.oldandinteresting.com/sulphur-matches.aspx>.

⁵ Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 2005), 93.

⁶ To attract more attention to the seriousness of the problem and to stimulate public conscientiousness, authors of that time created pitiful images of poor yet noble children who were left on their own, inhabiting city streets or sometimes the countryside. Victor Hugo (1802–1885), Hector Malot (1830–1907) and Charles Dickens (1812–1870) were perhaps the most famous writers whose novels addressed this issue. In *Les Misérables*, Hugo proclaims that “the gamin, the urchin of present-day Paris is at once a national emblem and a disease that must be cured.” He addresses authorities with the direct question, “Are we to have children of France or street urchins of Paris?” See Anna Green, *French Paintings of Childhood and Adolescence, 1848-1886* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 72. A pathetic image of an urchin was evoked by writer and critic Jules Janin (1804–1874): “The Paris urchin! Lovable child! Born noble in every way. Indeed, how infinitely preferable in his savage, ragged verity to those dolled-up little Parisian messieurs whose maids take them for a walk in the Tuileries with such grand ceremony.” See Jules Janin, “Le gamin de Paris” in *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes: Encyclopédie morale du dix-neuvième siècle*, vol. 2, ed. Leon Curmer (Paris: L. Curmer, 1841), 466.

⁷ Jeanne Gaillard, *Paris, la ville: 1852-1870* (Paris: Champion, 1977), 411–12.

⁸ Green, 64.

⁹ The government and the public became very much preoccupied with social reforms in the last decade of the nineteenth century, as the subject of mass youth idleness and its destructive influence on street children became a major concern of the bourgeoisie.

¹⁰ Notably, the Belgian general election of 1848 benefitted the Liberal Party and brought universal suffrage for men in France.

¹¹ Poor nutrition causes nearly half (45%) of deaths in children under five, totalling 3.1 million deaths each year. See “Hunger Statistics,” World Food Programme, accessed December 5, 2015, <https://www.wfp.org/hunger/stats>.

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