



Fig. 1. Herman Meindertsz Doncker, *Three Children*, ca. 1645, oil on oak panel, 40.2 x 29.2 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 2. 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. 3. Jacques Sablet the Younger, *Family Portrait in front of a Harbour*, 1800, oil on canvas, 64.8 x 81.4 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 4. Théophile Hamel, *Madame Charles-Hilaire Teñtu, née Elizabeth O'Brien, and Her Son Eugène*, 1841, oil on canvas, 115.1 x 97.2 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The Miniature Adult: The Evolution of Children's Clothing and the Concept of Childhood from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Centuries

Georges-Étienne Carrière

Portraiture is one of the oldest and most studied types of painting. In spite of all the scholarly attention this genre receives, ranging from the study of the inner virtues and personalities of sitters to ideals of beauty and the meaning of the subject's gaze, little attention has been paid to the meanings embedded in the clothing of portrait subjects. Whereas today's fast fashion has made clothing cheap and disposable, clothing was historically a much more important aspect of a person's public persona. As such, studying the attire of a portrait subject may reveal the values of the individual and of the society to which they belonged.¹

Encompassing the period from birth through middle childhood to adolescence, the concept of childhood as we know it today only began to develop in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, children were seen as imperfect adults subject to evil as they were not yet able to think rationally and control themselves.² Medievalist James A. Schultz has argued that children were considered "deficient" and inferior to adults. The early stages of life were therefore of little interest to society. Consequently, children's fashions were nothing more than miniature versions of what women wore; this was the case even for boys, who were only allowed to wear what men wore once they reached a certain age.³ At times children were almost seen as the play dolls of adults: their clothing followed current trends, yet was exaggerated like that of dolls. Other times, children's attire was slightly simplified when they were meant to be worn for play but still remained remarkably similar to what their parents wore.⁴ Through an analysis of paintings ranging from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, this

exhibition essay explores the evolution of children's clothing and the concept of childhood among the upper classes in Europe and Quebec.

The Protestant Reformation exerted a profound influence on cultural and social practices in the Dutch Republic after the Catholic Church was rejected in the later sixteenth century. In particular, the style of clothing in the region exhibited a greater emphasis on the virtues of modesty and piousness. *Three Children* (1645) (fig. 1) by Dutch Golden Age painter Herman Meindertsz Doncker (ca. 1600–ca. 1666) represents a group of three standing children with a hill and a cloudy sky in the background.



Fig. 1. Herman Meindertsz Doncker, *Three Children*, ca. 1645, oil on oak panel, 40.2 x 29.2 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The children wear similar black dresses as they pose with dignified expressions. The eldest is probably about fifteen years old, while the youngest does not appear to be older than the age of

six. The children are shown completely covered and void of any sexual identity. The girls' clothing conforms to what puritan women wore during this era, namely dresses made of dark wools and starched white linen, heavily boned bodices showcasing a narrow waist and large collars that were sometimes ornamented with lace trims but were generally plain. Although the clothing is simple and unpretentious, the wealth and status of these subjects is evident in the elaborate and expensive laces used for the collars of the youngest and eldest children.⁵ As illustrated in this depiction, linen headdresses, which signified humility, were sometimes ornamented with subtle but elaborate lace trims. The youngest and eldest girls are wearing red coral, a precious gemstone commonly seen in children's portraits throughout history but particularly so during the Italian and Dutch Renaissances. Since coral constantly regenerates itself, it was thought to bring protection and healing to children at a time when child mortality rates were disconcertingly high.⁶ The conservative appearance of the three children reflects the prevailing perception of children as imperfect adults who were particularly susceptible to sin and who thus required training at a very young age to become truly pious.

The three girls in Doncker's work represent virtues that women were expected to embody in the mid-seventeenth century. Portraiture in the Dutch Republic was usually intended to convey social messages, and the fact that children and adults were depicted in similar ways suggests that children's future roles as adults were impressed upon them as they viewed such images.⁷ Children began to receive training at a very young age in order to reach true piety as proper women. In fact, an English Catholic clergymen named Thomas Gataker (1574–1654) created a catechism book for children.⁸ Society believed that children needed to realize their need for salvation, which was an essential aspect of the Protestant faith.⁹ The dignified poses of the three ostensible sisters are standard in Doncker's portraits of children and adults alike, revealing not

only the idealization of the figures, but also society's treatment of children as adults. Through clothing, this portrait emphasizes its subjects' fidelity and humility—virtues that girls were expected to develop and that were demanded of women as ideal wives.

François de Troy's (1645–1730) *Presumed Portrait of Madame de Franqueville and Her Children* (1712) (fig. 2) demonstrates that the costumes of the elite in early eighteenth-century France were far more ostentatious than those of its northern neighbours in the previous century.



Fig. 2. 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.

Troy became known for his informal and naturalistic portraits of wealthy patrons, rendered in an early rococo aesthetic that departed from the more rigid styles of his predecessors, such as French painter Nicolas de Largillière (1656–1746).¹⁰ This painting is a family portrait of a mother and her children arranged in a half circle. Similar to Doncker's work, the children are depicted in

clothing appropriate for adults, although the daughters' bodies are exposed and sexualized in comparison to Doncker's modestly dressed children. Forgoing notions of simplicity, the mother is wearing a richly coloured and luxurious silk dress with a wide *décolletage*. The girls are similarly dressed in the fashions of the day, wearing tight bodices emphasizing the very desirable narrow waist and deep *décolletage* despite not having yet reached puberty. The younger daughter's gown features a modesty panel, yet she is wearing a corseted bodice despite a lack of cleavage. Meanwhile, a black servant attending to the older daughter is wearing a white turban with a feather, departing from the rococo fashion of the others and alluding to the fantastical and theatrical fashion of the era.¹¹ To the right of the mother is a young boy who is caressing her hand. His outfit, consisting of a justacorps and breeches, signifies that he is of the appropriate age to be considered an adult, as pants were only worn by men.¹² This portrait is similar to Doncker's work in that it showcases the desirability of its young female subjects as future wives, but its emphasis is on physical beauty and sensuality rather than on virtue.¹³ This reflects the declining cultural influence of religion during the rise of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century.¹⁴

In the mid-eighteenth century, children's clothing became less constraining and more practical and comfortable. This evolution in children's fashion reflected changing concepts of childhood during the Age of Enlightenment in France. While the traditional belief that children should be rigorously trained from a young age to be proper adults persisted, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), a controversial but influential philosopher of the period, argued in *Émile, ou De L'Éducation* (1762) that children should be brought up in accordance with the dictates of nature, learning following their own rhythm through experimentation. According to him, parents were always looking for the adult within the child, thus disregarding the true nature of the child. Rousseau contended that children ought to be treated as such, and should be allowed to naturally

learn the ability to reason through lived experience rather than from inappropriate educational practices that forced these thoughts on them.¹⁵ The subsequent emerging perception that children were not merely imperfect adults was reflected in the rise of children's clothing that diverged from adult fashion.

Family Portrait in front of a Harbour (1800) (fig. 3) by Swiss painter Jacques Sablet the Younger (1749–1803) reflects the dramatic changes in children's fashion during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.



Fig. 3. Jacques Sablet the Younger, *Family Portrait in front of a Harbour*, 1800, oil on canvas, 64.8 x 81.4 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The harbour in the background suggests that this is a portrait of an upper-class merchant family. Similar to her mother, the girl in the centre of the painting is wearing a long, high-waisted muslin dress. Interestingly, however, this style of dress was originally designed for girls in the 1760s,

and only began to be worn by women after Marie Antoinette (1755–1793) was seen in this type of gown in the 1780s. This style became widespread during the years of the French Revolution (1789–99), and was made even more popular by Empress Joséphine (1763–1814) during the subsequent First French Empire (1804–1815). Although the girl's more simplistic and practical clothing in this painting reflects evolving notions of childhood, she and her brother resemble adults in their refined poses and actions. Unlike the high collar shirts, tailcoats and breeches of the men in the picture, the young boy is wearing perfectly tailored trousers and military-inspired garb—perhaps a trend inspired by Napoléon Bonaparte's (1769–1821) conquests.¹⁶ He is acting like a chivalrous gentleman to his sister, while she looks like a proper woman, much like her mother. Although children were now starting to be treated as such and their attire was becoming differentiated from that of their parents, they were still raised with the ultimate objective of marriage in mind.

Changing perceptions of childhood influenced the more practical clothing and playful demeanor of the boy depicted in the mid-nineteenth-century portrait *Madame Charles-Hilaire Têtu, née Elizabeth O'Brien, et son fils Eugène* (1841) (fig. 4) by Théophile Hamel (1817–1870).

Renowned for his portraits of the Canadian bourgeoisie, Hamel has painted the mother and young son of the wealthy Têtu family from Kamouraska, Quebec, in this work.¹⁷ The status of this family is made evident by the mother's dress, which emulates French and English fashion trends of the day.¹⁸ While Hamel's portraits tend to be simplistic, lacking accessories and embellished settings, Madame Têtu's (ca. 1807–1881) luxurious, dark teal silk satin dress and her intricate lace headdress, ornamented with flowers and ribbons, attest to her elite social status. Her conspicuous jewellery—rarely seen in Hamel's other portraits—distinguishes Madame Têtu from the artist's other affluent female sitters. She is wearing long teardrop earrings (in the collection of

the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and displayed next to the painting) and a cameo, and is guarding a gold watch necklace on her lap which has caught the interest of her three-year-old son.¹⁹



Fig. 4. Théophile Hamel, *Madame Charles-Hilaire Teatua, née Elizabeth O'Brien, and Her Son Eugène*, 1841, oil on canvas, 115.1 x 97.2 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Eugène, who is leaning over his mother's lap as he grasps the chain attached to the gold watch, is almost unidentifiable as a boy because of his ivory frock dress, exposed delicate shoulders and shoulder-length hair. The English embroidery on his cotton dress give it a pretty and delicate appearance similar to traditional lace. While the style of Eugène's gown resembles that of his mother's costume in cut, the cotton or linen *broderie anglaise* allows movement and is more durable than materials used in the past,²⁰ such as silk satins, delicate laces or fine muslin.²¹ This reflects changing notions of appropriate clothing for children. In some cases, boys up to the age of five, six or seven wore dresses much like their sisters did.²² While in early infancy dresses

made it easier to change a baby's diapers, young boys wore dresses alongside girls and women because they were not yet men and were thus deemed unworthy of donning men's clothing.²³

Hamel's portrait reflects the emerging view in the nineteenth century that play is a vital component of childhood. Whereas the earlier works in this essay emphasize the maturity and properness of their youthful subjects, this painting shows a young boy exhibiting the playful behavior that we associate with children today. Hamel appears to have been influenced by Romantic conceptions of childhood, as the boy in this portrait is depicted not as a premature adult but as a playful child. In the second half of the nineteenth century, children's clothing became more suitable for play, resulting in the popularity of large skirts on dresses, sailor suits and other comfortable looks featuring pants, which allowed greater movement than earlier styles.²⁴ In addition, depictions of children playing with toys became increasingly common, as seen in Hamel's portrait (although Madame Têtu would beg to differ that her watch is a toy). This work offers a glimpse into the early development of modern notions of childhood and the idea of the child at play.

Spanning the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, Doncker's *Three Children*, Troy's presumed portrait of the de Franqueville family, Sablet's *Family Portrait in front of a Harbour* and Hamel's *Madame Charles-Hilaire Teïtu, née Elizabeth O'Brien, and Her Son Eugène*, illustrate how upper-class children's clothing changed to reflect evolving conceptions of childhood. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, children were perceived as imperfect adults; as such, their restrictive clothing was intended to make them proper children—as in Doncker's painting—or to mould their bodies to reflect prevailing gender norms and social values, as in Troy's family portrait. The later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries gave rise to the

notion that children ought to be treated not as premature adults but as children who learn through play and experimentation. As Sablet's and Hamel's works demonstrate, fitted and constrictive dresses made of wool, silks and other precious materials were abandoned in favour of larger silhouettes and more comfortable and durable fabrics that allowed children to play and properly enjoy childhood.

NOTES

¹ Milou Goverde, "Imitation & Ambition: The Relation Between Dutch Adult and Child Portraiture, 1620-1650," Utrecht University Repository, <http://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/207896>.

² Eileen Collard, *From Toddler to Teens: An Outline of Children's Clothing, Circa 1780 to 1930* (Burlington: Collard, 1977), 5.

³ Colin Heywood, *A History of Childhood: Children and Childhood in the West from Medieval to Modern Times* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 2, 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵ Aileen Ribeiro, *Dress and Morality* (Oxford; New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986), 12–17.

⁶ Babette Bohn and James M. Saslow, eds., *A Companion to Renaissance and Baroque Art* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 275–294.

⁷ Goverde, 41.

⁸ Hugh Cunningham, *The Invention of Childhood* (London: BBC, 2006), 65, 68.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁰ "Troy, François de – Portrait presumé de Madame de Franqueville et de ses enfants," Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, accessed November 15, 2015, <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/wp-content/collections/app/detail.php?module=objects&type=popular&kv=1421>.

¹¹ Jean Cailleux, "Some Family and Group Portraits by François de Troy (1645-1730)," *The Burlington Magazine* 113, no. 817 (April 1971): xi.

¹² John Peacock, *Children's Costume: The Complete Historical Sourcebook* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 8.

¹³ Cunningham, 106.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 78–86, 106–109.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 113–15.

¹⁶ "Sablet, Jacques, The Younger – Portrait de famille devant un port," Montreal Museum of Fine Art, accessed November 15, 2015, <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/collections/?t=sablet#detail-8350>.

¹⁷ Raymond Vézina, *Théophile Hamel: Peintre national (1817-1870)* (Montreal: Éditions Élysée, 1975), 112.

¹⁸ Collard, 2.

¹⁹ Vézina, 185–194; Louise Gagnon, *L'apparition des modes enfantines au Québec* (Québec: Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, 1992), 195.

²⁰ *Broderie anglaise* refers to a "form of whitework embroidery in which round or oval holes are pierced in the material (such as cotton), and the cut edges then overcast; these holes, or eyelets,

are grouped in a pattern that is further delineated by simple embroidery stitches on the surrounding material.” See *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “Broderie anglaise,” accessed January 18, 2016, <http://www.britannica.com/art/broderie-anglaise>.

²¹ A *Workwoman's Guide* from 1838 recommended that children not wear silk, velvet, gauze or hard-to-wash fabrics; instead jeans, twills, prints, holland and nankeen fabrics were preferred so that children could play with ease. See Anne Buck, *Clothes and the Child: A Handbook of Children's Dress in England 1500-1900* (Carlton: Ruth Bean, 1996), 125–26.

²² John Peacock, *Children's Costume: The Complete Historical Sourcebook* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 8.

²³ Buck, 102.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 118, 124.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bohn, Babette, and James M. Saslow, eds. *A Companion to Renaissance and Baroque Art*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2013.

Buck, Anne. *Clothes and the Child: A Handbook of Children's Dress in England, 1500-1900*. Carlton: Ruth Bean, 1996.

Cailleux, Jean. “Some Family and Group Portraits by François de Troy (1645-1730).” *The Burlington Magazine* 113, no. 817 (April 1971): i-xviii.

Collard, Eileen. *From Toddler to Teens: An Outline of Children's Clothing, Circa 1780 to 1930*. Burlington, Ontario: E. Collard, 1977.

Cunningham, Hugh. *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500*. London; New York: Longman, 1995.

———. *The Invention of Childhood*. London: BBC, 2006.

Gagnon, Louise. *L'apparition des modes enfantines au Québec*. Québec: Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, 1992.

Goverde, Milou. “Imitation & Ambition: The Relation Between Dutch Adult and Child Portraiture, 1620-1650.” Master's Thesis, Utrecht University, 2011. <http://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/207896>.

Heywood, Colin. *A History of Childhood: Children and Childhood in the West from Medieval to Modern Times*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001.

Peacock, John. *Children's Costume: The Complete Historical Sourcebook*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2009.

Ribeiro, Aileen. *Dress and Morality*. Oxford; New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986.

Vézina, Raymond. *Théophile Hamel: Peintre national (1817-1870)*. Montreal: Éditions Élysée, 1975.