



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. Diane Arbus, *A Young Brooklyn Family Going for a Sunday Outing, New York City*, 1966, gelatin silver print, 50.5 x 40.5 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

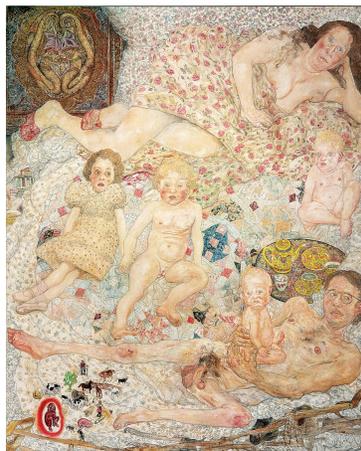


Fig. 3. Marion Wagschal, *Artists and Children*, 1988, oil on linen, metal leaf, metallic paint, 254 x 211 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Shifting Interpretations of the Nuclear Family: Aristocracy, Conformity, Intimacy

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A nuclear family, comprised of a couple and their dependent children, constitutes the traditional concept of a family in Western society. Social and cultural changes across time have generated diverse representations of the nuclear family in Western art. The significance of the nuclear family and diverse expressions of familial identity will be explored through three artworks conceived in different time periods and places: an affluent family is portrayed in French portraitist François de Troy's (1645–1730) *Presumed Portrait of Madame de Franqueville and Her Children* (1712) (fig. 1); a working-class family exemplifying traditional values is the subject of American photographer Diane Arbus's (1923–1971) *A Young Brooklyn Family Going for a Sunday Outing, New York City* (1966) (fig. 2); and the intimate family of two professors and artists is depicted in Montreal artist Marion Wagschal's (b. 1943) *Artists and Children* (1988) (fig. 3).

On the cusp of the eighteenth century, privacy and domesticity were surfacing in portraiture commissioned to adorn interiors.¹ Born in Toulouse, Troy produced family pictures for typically elite patrons who desired images showcasing their material wealth and poise.² *Madame de Franqueville and Her Children*, a large portrait of a mother and her children in an idealized domestic interior, is intended to display the family's estate. While the identity of the de Franqueville family remains uncertain, the family's social status and wealth are evident in Troy's precise and detailed rendering of the luscious silks of the figures' clothing, the majestic space of the gallery and the garden and greenery visible beyond the elevated patio.³



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.

The young girl sitting on a red velvet cushion in the far left corner—presumably the future Comtesse de Lys—is adorned in a rich blue dress with silver embroidery running along its hem. She is in the process of pleating a garland similar to the one in her hair.⁴ Her older sister—possibly the future Madame de La Baume—is standing tall behind her, dressed in an orange gown with an olive-coloured shawl animated by the wind.⁵ A domestic attendant is holding the train of her gown. His silver earrings and collared necklace are signs of “servitude and luxury.”⁶ The attendant’s presence only reiterates the family’s desire to convey their social status in this commissioned work.

The delicately executed hands of the figures are joined together in a display of familial unity. Seated in a blue armchair, the mother is holding out her hands to her children on either side in a gesture of maternal affection. A young boy on the right lovingly embraces his mother’s hand.⁷

An oval portrait of the patriarch, hanging above the mother and children behind the tied-back curtain in the background, serves as a substitute for his physical presence. There is a strong sense of hierarchy occurring within the image: the father's portrait is hung high above his family, while the mother and her children pose for the painting in a linear fashion. Although the older daughter is taller than her mother, who is seated authoritatively in her armchair, her deferential gaze signifies her place within the family hierarchy. *Presumed Portrait of Madame de Franqueville and Her Children* demonstrates how the image of a nuclear family may serve the function of showcasing their elite social status.

Whereas Troy's family portrait is an idealized depiction of a wealthy, conventionally beautiful and loving family, Arbus's *A Young Brooklyn Family Going for a Sunday Outing, New York City* captures the unconventional appearance of a working-class family in Brooklyn in the mid-1960s.



Diane Arbus, *A Young Brooklyn Family Going for a Sunday Outing, New York City*, 1966, gelatin silver print, 50.5 x 40.5 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Primarily known for her images of marginalized communities, twins, families and institutionalized patients, Arbus presents viewers “other realities than that of mainstream middle class domesticity.”⁸ She employed traditional portraiture devices in her candid snapshots of lone individuals or groups of people,⁹ and focused on establishing a relationship with her subjects.¹⁰ *A Young Brooklyn Family Going for a Sunday Outing, New York City* is an informal, close-up portrait of Marylin and Richard Dauria and their two young children during an excursion in the city. The young couple met at school and married when Marylin was sixteen. Richard was an Italian immigrant who worked as a garage mechanic.¹¹ Although the title of the photograph indicates that the Daurias are from Brooklyn, Marylin and Richard grew up in the Bronx.¹² The apartment building in the background is indicative of Brooklyn’s suburban milieu during this decade. Due to housing strains within the city, working-class families like the Daurias settled in the city’s peripheries, such as the Bronx and Brooklyn.¹³ The Dauria family represents “a class, a neighborhood, and a specific generation.”¹⁴

The frontal composition of this photograph creates a direct relationship between the photographer/viewer and the subjects, who, in the possibility of being scrutinized, shy away from the camera.¹⁵ This is apparent in the father’s meek and vulnerable expression and in the gazes of the mother and two children, which are directed away from the camera. There is a sense of uneasiness and tension within the photograph, as the parents are in contact with their children but not with each other. Moreover, Arbus’s use of a camera flash in midday produces starkly rendered faces against a soft, unfocused background, imbuing the image with an unnatural feel. Nevertheless, this young working-class family, dealing with the stigma of cognitive disability, is attempting to present themselves in public as a traditional family. The figures are dressed in their

best attire: the mother is wearing an elegant dress and holding a stylish leopard print coat; the children are dressed in pristine white garments; and the father is sporting a stylish topcoat and slacks. Moreover, Marilyn and Richard exemplify prevailing notions of femininity and masculinity in American sixties popular culture: Marilyn's face is made up to resemble Elizabeth Taylor (1932–2011), while Richard resembles the actor James Dean (1931–1955).

As in *Presumed Portrait of Madame de Franqueville and Her Children*, familial love is expressed through physical contact between the figures. The mother is carrying her infant in her arms, while the father is gripping his son's hand. However, in contrast to Troy's painting of the de Franqueville family, Arbus's portrait does not idealize its subjects. Instead, it illustrates a working-class family with a cognitively challenged child aiming toward, but ultimately deviating from, the normative image of a middle-class nuclear family.

Whereas Arbus offers a stark and uneasy image of a family, Wagschal's *Artists and Children* focuses on the warmth and intimacy within a family.¹⁶ Wagschal's portrait and figurative practice addresses themes of sexuality, identity and family, and she often paints close friends and family members. This work is a family portrait of David Elliot and Elise Bernatchez—both professors and artists—and their four children. Unlike Troy and Arbus, who rely on compositional devices traditionally used in family portraiture, Wagschal employs a pseudo-aerial perspective to capture the family dynamic.¹⁷ Figure and ground become one, generating a sense of immediacy and intimacy between the subjects and the viewer. The artist produced separate observational drawings of each subject, and then used them to conceive the group configuration within her final composition. Wagschal has also incorporated significant objects in the Elliot-

Bernatchez home into this imaginary scene, such as children's toys in the bottom left corner, a tea set behind the father, a tapestry in the top left corner and quilts throughout.



Fig. 3. Marion Wagschal, *Artists and Children*, 1988, oil on linen, metal leaf, metallic paint, 254 x 211 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The painting's subjects lounge on supple quilts, with the mother at the head of the painting, the children below her and the father holding the youngest child near the bottom of the composition. There is a lack of depth within the painting and the figures are treated with uniform weight. The mother at the top is just as large in scale as her children and husband below her.¹⁸ Only the mother and the nude child in the centre of the painting are making direct eye contact with the viewer. The children below the mother to the left, one garbed in a dress and the other unclothed, are holding hands. The same contact occurs between the father and infant near the bottom of the painting, and is a sign of family unity. However, while they may be pictured together, each subject seems lost in his/her own train of thought. Various clothed or naked, each family

member bears an impassive facial expression, conveying neither amusement nor enthrallment despite the leisurely nature of the scene. Wagschal thus invites the viewer to question the family dynamic within the painting.

Wagschal's depiction of this nuclear family is infused with symbolic motifs that reveal the family's values. The tea tray behind the father and the toys in the bottom left corner signify an appreciation for family bonding. Among the toys there is a bright red Mayan sculpture symbolizing fertility.¹⁹ Indeed, the Elliot-Bernatchez family is a large one. The tapestry in the top left corner shows twin serpents, a metaphor for the equality between mother and father.²⁰ The woven and detailed quilt throughout the painting symbolizes familial unity, comfort and security. The quilt, the binding element in this painting, also has sentimental value as it has been stitched by hand. In contrast to Troy's and Arbus's works, *Artists and Children* examines familial identity within a private context.²¹ A family's nudity in the privacy of a domestic space is put on display in this work.

Some of the many possible meanings that may be attributed to the nuclear family are explored in Troy's *Presumed Portrait of Madame de Franqueville and Her Children*, Arbus's *A Young Brooklyn Family Going for a Sunday Outing, New York City* and Wagschal's *Artists and Children*. There is no singular classification of the nuclear family, as suggested by Troy's formal portrait of a wealthy family, Arbus's young working-class family trying to conform to normative ideals, and Wagschal's imaginary depiction of an intimate family. Setting, composition and physical appearance within each work come together to reveal a family's identity.

NOTES

¹ Katherine Hoffman, *Concepts of Identity: Historical and Contemporary Images and Portraits of Self and Family* (New York: Icon Editions, 1996), 38.

² *Ibid.*, 45.

³ Jean Cailleux, “L’art du dix-huitième siècle: Some Family and Group Portraits by François de Troy,” *Burlington Magazine* 113, no. 817 (April 1971): xi.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Marcia Pointon, *Brilliant Effects: A Cultural History of Gem Stones and Jewellery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 167–68.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Hoffman, 169.

⁹ Judith Goldman, “Diane Arbus: The Gap between Intention and Effect,” *Art Journal* 34, no. 1 (Autumn 1974): 30.

¹⁰ Hoffman, 5.

¹¹ Trevor Fairbrother and Sarah Vowell, *Family Ties: A Contemporary Perspective* (Salem: Peabody Essex Museum in association with Marquand Books, 2003), 26.

¹² “A Young Brooklyn Family going for a Sunday Outing, N.Y.C. 1966,” National Galleries Scotland, accessed January 30, 2016, <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artists-a-z/a/artist/diane-arbus/object/a-young-brooklyn-family-going-for-a-sunday-outing-n-y-c-1966-ar00512>.

¹³ The spread of a people outwards from an urban centre into its peripheries is known as suburbanization. See Anthony Adamson, “Suburbanization,” *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 46, no. 8 (August 1955): 324.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Sarah Fillmore et al., *Marion Wagschal* (Montreal: Battat Contemporary, 2014), 111.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Despite the sense of order occurring within the image, the mother and father in this family are to be acknowledged as equals; one parent does not hold greater significance than the other. See Fillmore et al., 111.

²¹ Hoffman, 23.

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