



Fig. 1. Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller, *Children on Their Way Home from School*, 1836, oil on paper mounted on wood, 44.5 x 34.5 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Examining Children and the Landscape in Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller's Painting *Children on Their Way Home from School*

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European paintings of the nineteenth century can provide evidence of the significant social and cultural changes that occurred following wars, revolutions and the arrival of industrialization during this period. Paintings of peasants and children in particular emphasize the growing idealization of peasant life and childhood by the upper classes. Austrian painter Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller (1793–1865) brought portraiture and landscape together in his narrative work examining everyday life. While his works often depict children in landscapes, *Children on Their Way Home from School* (1836) (fig. 1) is unique in its portrayal of vulnerable children on the fringes of society, attempting to navigate peasant life in accordance with bourgeois notions of public and private space.

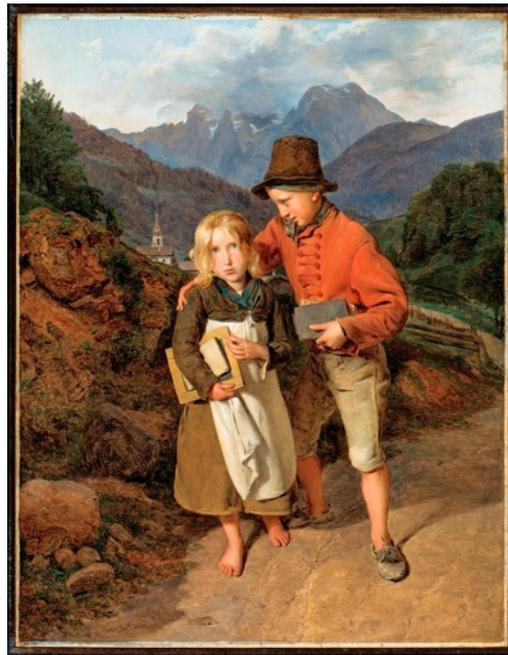


Fig. 1. Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller, *Children on Their Way Home from School*, 1836, oil on paper mounted on wood, 44.5 x 34.5 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

*Children on Their Way Home from School* presents two children in a country landscape in the Berchtesgaden region between Vienna and Germany.<sup>1</sup> They are on a long country road that winds behind them back toward the village, where a church steeple can be seen in the distance. The children's path forward is not visible to the viewer, though it seems to continue through the mountains. The remaining length of their journey home and the dangers it poses are unknown. The girl appears apprehensive and frightened; she meets the viewer's gaze with an intense look that mingled curiosity and uncertainty. The older boy, presumably her brother, has his arm around her in a comforting gesture. He is turned towards her and appears to be encouraging her to move forward. The children carry school books and are dressed in peasant clothing. The girl is barefoot, further indicating that she and her brother live in poverty.

The children occupy the centre of the image and are bathed in sunlight, emphasizing that they are the main subject of the painting. Their bodies are placed in the foreground, while the valley in the background is in shadow and recedes into the distance, creating a convincing sense of depth. The large Watzmann peak looms behind the children, its summit obscured by large, grey clouds.<sup>2</sup> The horizontal sprawl of the forested hills is interrupted by the verticality of the children and the mountain peak. The use of colour throughout the work is simple and understated, yet there is a richness and luminosity in the creamy yellows, pinks and greys of the children's clothes and the girl's hair. The landscape is constructed using muted greens for the trees, dark ochre for the boulders and grey-purple for the mountains. The scenery is exquisitely rendered but does not draw attention away from the children. The realism of this work and the specificity of its location suggest that this is a believable and unremarkable scene of quotidian life.

This work catered to a demand for idealized scenes of peasant life among members of the middle class. Following the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815) and the Congress of Vienna in 1815—the principal objective of which was to prevent imperialism—the social structure in Europe changed dramatically, giving rise to an affluent urban middle class.<sup>3</sup> To distance themselves from the turmoil of politics and revolution, the bourgeoisie developed values centred around family and domesticity,<sup>4</sup> which became popular themes in art. During the Biedermeier period (1815–1848), art, literature, furniture and interior design emphasized the unprovocative and unproblematic aspects of home and country life.<sup>5</sup> The focus on non-political subjects and domestic tranquility was a refuge from the public sphere,<sup>6</sup> as people did not want to be reminded of the sadness and harshness of life.<sup>7</sup> This sentiment comes across in the pleasant subject matter of paintings produced in the early nineteenth century, such as *Children on Their Way Home from School*.

This work is a typical Biedermeier genre painting, although the girl's timid expression and lack of shoes lend the work a somewhat darker undertone. Nevertheless, the children look very clean and well groomed, without any tears or dirt on their clothes. Waldmüller offers us a sterile and aesthetically pleasing portrayal of poverty. This work is unassuming, frank and idyllic, reflecting the aesthetic of a developing modern culture. The Biedermeier style is evident in the work's straightforward composition, clean application of paint with no visible brushwork, accurate rendering and harmonious colours.<sup>8</sup> Other major characteristics of the Biedermeier style that are present in this work include a morally instructive narrative,<sup>9</sup> the fusion of landscape and portrait painting and the representation of bourgeois values by idealizing peasant life.

Before the rapid development of urban living, which drew many away from the country, peasant painting was either dramatic or sentimental.<sup>10</sup> Peasants were seen as inferior and needed to be easily identifiable to ensure that they did not pose any threat to civilized society.<sup>11</sup> Peasant life was seen as gruelling and unpleasant, yet essential to economic growth and prosperity, which led to a polarization of its representation. Peasants were either portrayed as noble and wholesome labourers who were wise and shared a sentimental connection to the land, or they were shown as ignorant, uncivilized, poor and of little value to society.<sup>12</sup> It was imperative that the upper classes be cognizant of the peasant's function so that the social structure of society could be maintained. *Children on Their Way Home from School* demonstrates bourgeois conceptions of country life by presenting the children as vulnerable and therefore unproblematic peasants. They are portrayed as humble and inferior members of a hierarchical social structure.

As the affluent grew disenchanted with city life, they looked to the country for solace. Filling their homes with intimate paintings such as this work by Waldmüller served not only to decorate the space,<sup>13</sup> but also to provide a reminder of the goodness of nature. This newfound appreciation for the natural world manifested in a romanticized view of rural life. The persistence of urbanization in the nineteenth century also led to a greater concern for capturing the authenticity of peasant life, which was quickly becoming obsolete. Country people began to be seen as an idealized version of the urbanites, as their way of life was understood as having purpose and value, opposite to life in the city.<sup>14</sup> The unhappy bourgeoisie projected their utopian ideals onto peasant life, as Waldmüller's painting demonstrates. Although marginalized, peasant children existed outside of the problematic industrialized mainstream, which made them alluring to the middle and upper social classes as the subjects of artworks. Waldmüller omitted the toil and

hardship of peasant life in his works, choosing instead to depict moments of joy and purity.<sup>15</sup> He idealized peasants so that their everyday lives were imbued with heroism. In *Children on Their Way Home from School*, the dramatic lighting on the boy and girl, the tableau-like composition and the air of carefree simplicity lend a theatricality to this painting, suggesting that the children are engaged in a formulaic performance of peasant life rather than demonstrating genuine experience. The wealthy owned images of poverty similar to this work to bring comfort to their own lives.

While Waldmüller's work reflects artistic trends of the day, it has a subtle uniqueness and complexity that stems from his strong beliefs in what he thought art should be. Dissatisfied with the conservative and stale teaching methods enforced at the Imperial Academy where he taught, Waldmüller chose to bring his students outside where they could gain authentic experience through an appreciation of the natural world.<sup>16</sup> Waldmüller painted outside to imbue his work with vividness and life.<sup>17</sup> His exaggerated rendering of natural light gives *Children on Their Way Home from School* a sense of naturalism and romanticism that could only be achieved through a keen observation and understanding of the natural world.

As the concept of childhood as a crucial period of intellectual, emotional and spiritual growth began to take hold in the mid-nineteenth century, so did the notion that spending time outside in nature was essential to a child's healthy development.<sup>18</sup> Children needed to be moulded from the beginning to ensure that they would be equipped "to take their proper places in society."<sup>19</sup> Always an advocate of the natural world, Waldmüller used genre painting as a means of promoting his perceptions of childhood and the landscape.

In comparison to *Children on Their Way Home from School*, other paintings by Waldmüller demonstrate a different relationship between children and their surroundings. The idea of the home as a refuge is evident in *Young Peasant Woman with Three Children at the Window* (1840) (fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller, *Young Peasant Woman with Three Children at the Window*, 1840, oil on canvas, 84.6 x 67.5 cm, Neue Pinakothek.  
<http://www.wikiart.org/en/ferdinand-georg-waldm-ller/young-peasant-woman-with-three-children-at-the-window-1840>.

This painting illustrates the mother as the protector and primary educator of her children. The children look out the window from the comfort of the interior onto the outside world, happy inside their home and secure in their closeness to their mother and one another. The sun shines directly on the three children, yet only reflects slightly on the mother, suggesting that she is meant to occupy the feminine space of the home. The children make eye contact with the viewer,

as does the mother, yet their gaze represents a fleeting moment. They are contentedly observing the world around them from a place of safety. Thus their expressions differ greatly from that of the young girl in *Children on Their Way Home from School*, whose direct gaze raises compelling questions: Is the viewer intended to represent someone the children are encountering on the road, or is the viewer someone only the girl can see—an idea, a thought, a fear materializing out of the landscape? The girl looks at us imploringly as she is uncomfortably situated within the male-dominated outdoor space without the presence of her mother or the comfort of home.

Another work by Waldmüller that deals with the relationship between interior and exterior space is *Singing Children* (1858) (fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller, *Singing Children*, 1858.  
<http://www.wikiart.org/en/ferdinand-georg-waldmuller/singing-children-1858>.

This painting of an interior space shows six wealthy children gathered around their mother, singing together. A boy can be seen looking through the window at the group inside. Oblivious to his presence, the children are absorbed in their activity and enveloped in the warm and loving comfort of their mother and home. Like the boy and girl in *Children on Their Way Home from School*, the child looking in on this scene is on the outskirts of middle-class society. These children occupy an uncomfortable liminal space between the public and private spheres, ultimately belonging to neither.

Waldmüller's painting *After School* (1841) (fig. 4) can also be examined in relation to *Children on Their Way Home from School*.



Fig. 4. Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller, *After School*, 1841, oil on wood, 78 x 94.5 cm, Alte Nationalgalerie. <http://www.wikiart.org/en/ferdinandgeorg-waldm-ller/after-school>.

Here a large group of children are gathered outside of a country school at the end of the day. Many of these children are dressed in the same clothing as the two children returning home from school in the latter work: they are wearing aprons, head scarves, hats, are barefoot and are carrying their books. However, none of these children meet the viewer's gaze, as they are more concerned with their own affairs and are not wary of the outside world. These children are energetic and expressive after being inside all day. They are absorbed in the drama, excitement and familiarity of their peers. These children are not portrayed as outcasts but as regular members of society. They are framed on the left side by a kindly older priest and a stern schoolteacher on the right, two figures who represent the authority, discipline and protection of society. The children are located within a safe space of order, where the only visible aspect of the landscape is a neatly manicured tree with flowers. There is nothing harmful or threatening in this environment, unlike in *Children on Their Way Home from School*, where the landscape is wild and filled with the unknown.

These paintings by Waldmüller contain important elements that suggest more about the context of their production than about their subject matter. The vast expansion of industrialization, the rapid emergence of the new bourgeois middle class and growing discontent led to revolutions throughout Europe in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> The abolition of serfdom in 1848 brought much hardship to vast numbers of peasants, as their livelihood was no longer guaranteed.<sup>21</sup> An examination of *Children on Their Way Home from School* in relation to other paintings of children by Waldmüller reveals a unique and prescient sense of unease about the future. The intense gaze of the girl in this painting is mesmerizing and unsettling, raising more questions than it can answer. Her look hints at the difficulties of peasant life, which are otherwise

unacknowledged in this quaint depiction of peasant children in a landscape. Moving away from the overwhelming sentimentality typical of genre painting, Waldmüller chose to explore a “poetic intensification of reality.”<sup>22</sup> Painting at a time when the bourgeoisie dictated social and cultural developments, Waldmüller successfully negotiated the idealized fantasies of the Biedermeier era, while creating work that sought to find truth in the humble lives of peasants. *Children on Their Way Home from School* emphasizes the importance of representations of children in their ability to encourage reflection on the social, historical and personal significance of daily life.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Nathalie Bondil, “Romantic Paintings – Two Major Acquisitions Acclaimed by the International Press,” *The Magazine of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts* (2013): 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Michelle Facos, “New Audiences, New Approaches,” in *An Introduction to Nineteenth-Century Art* (New York; London: Routledge, 2011), 166.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Apsis, “Richesses inconnues,” *Connaissance des arts*, no. 376 (1983): 49.

<sup>5</sup> Facos, 166.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>9</sup> Brigitta Cifka, “Tableaux de Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller en Hongrie,” *Bulletin du Musée hongrois des beaux-arts*, no. 55 (1980): 84.

<sup>10</sup> Facos, 249.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>13</sup> Apsis, 49.

<sup>14</sup> Facos, 249.

<sup>15</sup> Cifka, 84.

<sup>16</sup> Alfred Werner, “The Austrian Constable?” *Art & Artists* 12 (December 1977): 13.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> John A. Parks, “Naughty & Nice: Children's Portraits,” *American Artist* 72, no. 784 (February 2008): 49.

<sup>19</sup> Facos, 174.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Bideleux and Ian Jeffries, “An Empire in Crisis: East Central Europe and the Revolutions of 1848–1849,” in *A History of Eastern Europe: Crisis and Change* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 297.

<sup>21</sup> Facos, 247.

<sup>22</sup> Werner, 19.

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