



Fig. 1. William Bouguereau, *Crown of Flowers*, 1884, oil on canvas, 162.9 x 89.9 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

A Silent Look for Help:

The Ambiguous Gaze in William-Adolphe Bouguereau's *Crown of Flowers*

Cecilia Erica Blume

William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905) was a French academic artist known for his highly technical and skilled renderings of mythical and biblical scenes. Throughout his career, he also contributed to the growing trend of genre scenes featuring children and families in both the countryside and the Parisian metropolis. Bouguereau's *Crown of Flowers* (1884) (fig. 1) is a genre painting showing two girls at play in a rural landscape. Although this work is generally interpreted as a nostalgic return to childhood for the adult viewer, further analysis of the body language and gaze of the figures suggests more sinister, violent and sexual undertones. As Anne Higonnet states: "Romantic images of children gain power not only from their charms, but also from their menace."¹ Although *Crown of Flowers* evokes the Romantic notion of girlhood by placing the figures in a tranquil rural setting, the younger girl's brooding expression creates a sense of tension that disturbs the pastoral beauty of the scene. The adult viewer "likens the girl child to the adult woman," and in doing so sexualizes the female child's body.² Focusing on the figure of the young girl in *Crown of Flowers*, this essay will examine personal and cultural anxieties around female adolescent sexuality in Europe in the nineteenth century.



Fig. 1. William Bouguereau, *Crown of Flowers*, 1884, oil on canvas, 162.9 x 89.9 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Life during the nineteenth century was far from idyllic, especially for girls. The modern concept of childhood as we know it only began to develop in the eighteenth century. Children were hitherto treated based on conflicting interpretations: they were controlled by demonic and uncontrollable instincts, or were angelic with pure spirits.³ Cultural anxieties around female upbringing and education—exacerbated by the fear of young women being exploited and abused—reflected the harsh realities of nineteenth-century society. These concerns underlie Bouguereau's *Charity* (1865) (fig. 2). Here a relatively young mother is sitting at the base of a large marble pillar, nursing a baby in one arm while two other children rest by her side. The woman looks out at the viewer with one arm extended asking for charity. In *French Paintings of Childhood and Adolescence, 1848–1886*, Anna Green explains the subtext of such depictions of women seeking charity: during this period, middle- and upper-class men were taking advantage of destitute young women—many of whom were from the poverty-ridden countryside—seeking

a better life for themselves and their family in the city. Because no other choice was available to them, these women often resorted to prostitution.⁴



Fig. 2. William Bouguereau, *Charity*, 1865, oil on canvas, 121.9 x 152.4 cm, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery. © Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery. <http://www.bmagic.org.uk/objects/1897P11>.

With this in mind, we can begin to see Bouguereau's *Crown of Flowers* in a different light, particularly in comparison with some of his other paintings of young women. The two girls in *The Secret* (ca. 1876) (fig. 3) are a little older than those in *Crown of Flowers*, perhaps in their late teens. They are standing by a well, where there is an infant lying on the edge playing with the surface of the water.⁵ The girl in the background with dark hair plays the role of a secret-teller. She appears sly and intrusive as she grips the shoulder of the other girl standing in front of her. The girl listening to the secret looks disinterested in both the secret and the secret-teller as she glances towards her left into the distance.



Fig. 3. William Bouguereau, *The Secret*, ca. 1876, oil on canvas, 130.8 x 97.2 cm, Collection of The New York Historical Society. <http://www.wikiart.org/en/william-adolphe-bouguereau/the-secret>.

Similar to *Crown of Flowers*, one person is attempting to attract the attention of another who remains indifferent. In the former painting the young girl's brooding gaze betrays underlying anxieties about stolen childhoods and the sexualization of youth. These concerns are explicitly visualized in *The Secret*: the girl in the foreground has seemingly shed her innocence, as her left shoulder is provocatively exposed and she appears unamused by her gossiping friend.

The mythological theme of "the secret" signifies a sort of marriage portrait and is symbolic of an imminent betrothal. The little cherubic boy at the well supports this reading of Bouguereau's *The Secret*. The artist's naturalistic depiction of a mythological narrative in this painting is enhanced by his impeccable draughtsmanship. His skill is evident in his rendering of the girl's Romantic visage, especially the subtle blush in her cheeks and fingers and her milky skin tone. Another

artwork centring on the theme of “the secret” and suggesting a betrothal or marriage is Titian’s (ca. 1488–1576) *Sacred and Profane Love* (ca. 1514) (fig. 4). This work celebrates the marriage of Niccolò Aurelio, a secretary to the Venetian Council of Ten, and a young widow named Laura Bagarotto.



Fig. 4. Titian, *Sacred and Profane Love*, ca. 1514, oil on canvas, 118 x 279 cm, Galleria Borghese. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacred_and_Profane_Love#/media/File:Tiziano_-_Amor_Sacro_y_Amor_Profano_\(Galer%C3%ADa_Borghese,_Roma,_1514\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacred_and_Profane_Love#/media/File:Tiziano_-_Amor_Sacro_y_Amor_Profano_(Galer%C3%ADa_Borghese,_Roma,_1514).jpg).

On the left the bride is dressed in white and holding a vase of jewels. Beside her is a cupid reaching into a large sarcophagus. The bride is leaning on the left side of the sarcophagus, while on the right side is a nude Venus, who is partially covered in a white cloth and red shawl and is carrying a flame in her left hand. The jar of jewels symbolizes fleeting happiness on earth, whereas the flame represents “eternal happiness in heaven.”⁶

In both *Crown of Flowers* and *The Secret* there is one active female figure and a second more passive one. Furthermore, in both paintings the erotic qualities of the girls are pronounced.

Flowers are often imbued with erotic symbolism, and in *Crown of Flowers* the flowers in the girl's apron are placed in front of her sexual region. These flowers are used to create the crown of flowers on her head, linking the seemingly innocent activity to preparation for marriage. *The Secret* addresses similar themes by employing different symbols, such as the cupid and the vase. The vase is a symbol of virtue, while a broken vase or pitcher symbolizes the loss of one's virtue.

The sexualization of girls was contrary to the ideals of female education conceived by the eighteenth-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). At a time when the concept of childhood was still developing, Rousseau was an advocate of rearing children as “naturally” as possible.⁷ His treatise *Émile* (1762) concerns itself primarily with the education of boys by focusing on how a fictional boy named Émile should be brought up. Rousseau encourages raising children gently, with toys and play, out of doors whenever possible, and dressed in simple, loose-fitting clothing. The section of the work that deals with the education of girls centres on the character of Sophie, whose education is intended to shape her into the perfect wife for Émile. Sophie's innocence is different from Émile's in that she is regarded as innately inferior to her male counterpart and inclined to be coquettish, cunning and passionate. Rousseau believes that girls must be restrained, that their “natural” characteristics of intuition, passion and imagination must be carefully channelled so that they may develop into proper wives and mothers. He asserts: “The child is a sexual innocent but when they become an adolescent, their developing sexuality can only be restrained through straightforward instruction.”⁸

Education and upbringing during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries differed between boys and girls. At the time, education was still used as a force to uphold gender and status distinctions

within society.⁹ As Patricia Holland notes, girls were expected to present themselves as an image: “They must learn a special sort of exhibitionism and reproduce in themselves the charming qualities adults long to see.”¹⁰ Bouguereau’s *The Broken Pitcher* (1891) (fig. 5) speaks to cultural anxieties about the respectability of girls, especially since “sexual curiosity and potential corruption were relegated to adolescence.”¹¹



Fig. 5. William Bouguereau, *The Broken Pitcher*, 1891, oil on canvas, 133 x 85.5 cm, Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco. <http://www.wikiart.org/en/william-adolphe-bouguereau/the-broken-pitcher-1891>.

Lacking the care and control that a proper education provided, a girl could easily be consumed by juvenile passion and allow her virtue to be taken by the first man to come her way. In *The Broken Pitcher* a young woman is perching on the side of a well with a broken green clay pitcher by her feet on the right. She is barefooted and wearing a dark skirt, a green apron from the waist and a white shirt mostly covered up by a patterned shawl that wraps around and is tucked in at

the front. The figure's arms are extended and her hands are clasped together at her knee. She is looking out at the viewer with a tilted head and an imploring expression.

The broken pitcher as a symbol of the loss of innocence appears in earlier works such as Jean-Baptiste Greuze's (1725–1805) *La cruche cassée* ("The Broken Pitcher") (1771) (fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *La cruche cassée*, 1771, oil on canvas, 109 x 87 cm, Musée du Louvre. © 2007 Musée du Louvre / Angèle Dequier. <http://www.louvre.fr/oeuvre-notices/la-cruche-cassee>.

Greuze depicts a girl with childlike innocence and heavily blushed cheeks, standing and holding up some flowers scattered amongst the folds of her falling dress. Her scarf appears disturbed and her bodice is partially undone, exposing her equally pink nipple. On her right arm she is carrying a broken pitcher signifying the loss of her virginity. In Bouguereau's work of the same title, the viewer is drawn to the girl's large, knowing eyes and the coyness of her seated pose. Her facial

expression, body language and the broken pitcher make it apparent that she has shed her innocence.¹²

It is likely that the same model was used in *Crown of Flowers* and in *The Broken Pitcher*, which invites an interpretation of these two works as a continuous narrative.¹³ The young and naïve girl with the crown of flowers has grown into a young woman who has unashamedly lost her virtue in *The Broken Pitcher*. Being alone at this well in a secluded area hints that this is a meeting place between her and her lover. As Holland explains, “[A] female peasant or shepherdess depicted seated alone meant that she was waiting in the accustomed trysting place for the lover who would never appear.”¹⁴ This narrative is emphasized by the girl’s pleading look, slightly dishevelled hair and very rosy cheeks, which may be read as signs of post-coitus.

The ambiguously sexual gaze of the young girl in *Crown of Flowers* is echoed in Bouguereau’s *Petites Mendiantes* (1890) (fig. 7), in which two young peasant girls—probably sisters—are standing at a doorway as the younger girl holds out her hand begging for money. The girls are both barefooted, and the older girl is carrying a basket and a long walking stick, suggesting that they are on a long journey. As in *Crown of Flowers*, the younger girl’s gaze draws the viewer into the painting, and similar to Bouguereau’s *Charity*, the act of asking for charity in *Petites Mendiantes* carries sexual undertones.



Fig. 7. William Bouguereau, *Petites Mendiante*, 1890, oil on canvas, 161.6 x 93.4 cm, Syracuse University Art Collection.
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bouguereau,_Petites_mendiante,_1890_\(5589766955\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bouguereau,_Petites_mendiante,_1890_(5589766955).jpg).

The outstretched hand of the young girl recalls the anxious demeanour of the girl in *Crown of Flowers*. Both these figures bring to the viewer's attention the subtext of these works; they are in a submissive position, unable to escape their bleak fate as the playthings of middle- and upper-class men.

The gaze of the girl in *Crown of Flowers* is thus very troubling. Is this little girl's reticent look indicative of her imminent pubescence, suggested by the erotic placement of the flowers in her lap? This little girl's wreath of flowers symbolizes both the vestal virgin and the crown worn by a bride; she is growing up too quickly, and is fearful of what lies ahead.¹⁵ *Crown of Flowers* is

representative of paintings of girlhood innocence, which “were placed firmly in the past or were geographically removed,” hence distancing the nineteenth-century viewer from difficult contemporary realities.¹⁶ Along with the other works analyzed in this essay, *Crown of Flowers* celebrates a paradigm of girlhood innocence that is as saccharine as it is false. The implicit sexual imagery that pervades these works hints at the reality experienced by poor girls and women living in the nineteenth century, when prostitution was widespread and the idea of anti-labour laws for children was viewed as radical political thought. Paradoxically, the codification, glorification and diffusion of the Romantic cult of girlhood innocence, typical of Bouguereau’s paintings, coincided with an unprecedented exploitation of women and children.¹⁷

NOTES

¹ Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 29.

² Marcia Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1993), 177–226.

³ Anna Green, *French Paintings of Childhood and Adolescence, 1848–1886* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁵ This young boy or girl is interpreted to be a cupid as it was not uncommon to feature cupids and cherubs in paintings during this period.

⁶ “Sacred and Profane Love,” Galleria Borghese, accessed December 22, 2015, <http://www.galleriaborghese.it/borghese/en/eamor.htm>.

⁷ Higonnet, 26–27.

⁸ Jennifer Milam, “Sex Education and the Child: Gendering Erotic Response in Eighteenth-Century France,” in *Picturing Children: Constructions of Childhood between Rousseau and Freud*, ed. Marilyn R. Brown (Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate, 2002), 50.

⁹ Linda A. Pollock, foreword to *Picturing Children: Constructions of Childhood between Rousseau and Freud*, ed. Marilyn R. Brown (Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate, 2002), xviii.

¹⁰ Patricia Holland, *What is a Child? Popular Images of Childhood* (London: Virago, 1992), 16.

¹¹ Milam, 45.

¹² Fronia E. Wissman, *Bouguereau* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1996), 60.

¹³ Bouguereau hired models, many from Italy, and constructed his compositions using costumes and sets to materialize his ideal characters.

¹⁴ Wissman, 59.

¹⁵ George P. Monger, "Crowns," in *Marriage Customs of the World: An Encyclopaedia of Dating Customs and Wedding Traditions* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2013), 197; Monger, "Roman Weddings," 571.

¹⁶ Wissman, 33.

¹⁷ Loren Lerner, "Innocence," in *Girl Culture: An Encyclopedia*, vol. 2., ed. Claudia A. Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), 365–68.

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