Angels & Tomboys: Girlhood in 19th-Century American Art

by Holly Connor

"Daisy presented herself as an inscrutable combination of audacity and innocence."

Henry James, *Daisy Miller*, 1879

When Henry James described Daisy Miller, the quintessential American girl, as "an inscrutable combination of audacity and innocence," he highlighted characteristics associated with both the tomboy and the angel, feminine stereotypes that existed in the 19th-century and are still relevant and prevalent today. *Angels & Tomboys: Girlhood in 19th-Century American Art* is the first exhibition and catalogue to examine the diverse depictions of girls in 19th-century paintings, sculpture, prints and photographs. Featuring masterworks by John Singer Sargent, Thomas Eakins, Winslow Homer and William Merritt Chase together with those by exceptional women artists, Cecilia Beaux, Lilly Martin Spencer and Bessie Potter Vonnoh, the exhibition explores the multiple ways that writers and artists reflected, but also shaped, artistic and cultural interpretations of girlhood. While the sentimental portrayal of girls as angelic, passive and domestic was the pervasive characterization, this project also investigates transgressive images of tomboys, working children and adolescents. Among the themes embedded in the artworks are Victorian attitudes towards the nature and nurture of children; girls’ association with fashion, health, home and even America's future; and finally the impact of the Civil War on family life.

Arranged thematically, the exhibition begins with the subject of childhood androgyny by displaying adorable portraits of little boys and girls dressed in similar clothing, which underscore Victorian parents’ desire to view their children as innocent and asexual. The concept that childhood is a natural and spontaneous state is presented in the next gallery with idyllic scenes of girls immersed in lush, rural settings. During a period of increasing urbanization and industrialization, country girls were viewed as healthier, happier and purer than their urban counterparts. In the 1870s, Winslow Homer in his art and Louisa May Alcott in her novels explored these themes by celebrating the virtues of country girls. At the end of the century in works such as *Idle Hours* of about 1894 (fig. 1), Chase painted his daughters relaxing on the sand dunes of Shinnecock, Long Island, capturing the fleeting nature and the freshness of girlhood. Throughout the exhibition, the attributes or symbolic objects of girlhood such as flowers, pets and dolls are discussed, as these gendered accessories defined girls as sweet, submissive and domestic, while the view that girls are "mothers-in-waiting," another popular attitude, is embodied in such images as Seymour Joseph Guy's *A Bedtime Story* of 1878 (fig. 2).

Subsequent sections deal with energetic and adventurous tomboys, a new feminine type that emerged after the Civil War and provided alternate models of behavior to the quiet, angelic child. John George Brown pictured audacious tomboys: outdoors, fording streams and swinging on gates (fig. 3). Working girls appear in the searing prints of Jacob Riis, the pioneering social photographer, and offer a dramatic contrast to cheerful images of street children, domestic servants and rural laborers by contemporary painters. Memorable images of female readers and teachers address the new educational opportunities which became available to girls for the first time as they went to high school and then on to college. Homer was again on the forefront of these topical social issues in works such as *Reading by the Brook* of 1879 (fig. 4), which captures a young girl’s intellectual concentration and mental vibrancy. In the final gallery, compelling psychological images of moody teenagers were produced during a period at the end of the 19th-century when doctors began to recognize that adolescence was a unique stage in human development, defined by emotional turbulence and tremendous physical growth and maturation.

Though-provoking narrative paintings by Lilly Martin Spencer, the most important woman artist at mid-century, address
her deeply felt views on home, family and the nation during and after the Civil War, while the genre works of Eastman Johnson, John Rogers and Edward Lamson Henry examine issues of race and reconstruction. Among the artistic highlights are heartfelt images by Edmund Tarbell and Chase of their beautiful daughters dressed up for their portraits or captured unaware in the domestic sphere; riveting full length portraits by Chase, Frank Benson and Frank Duveneck that capture the fleeting beauty of childhood and enigmatic girlhood images of family members by Chase, Eakins and Seymour Joseph Guy, which together reveal the complexity of artists' personal response to the young girls who model for them and who inspired some of their greatest pictures. While individual works are analyzed in depth, they are also placed in a rich social, artistic and historical context, which provides multiple avenues for a greater understanding and appreciation of 19th-century girlhood.

The exhibition is comprised of 78 works from the Newark Museum, private collections and other major institutions across the country. Organized by Dr. Holly Pyne Connor, Curator of 19th-Century America Art, Angels and Tomboys debuted at the Newark Museum from September 12, 2012 to January 6, 2013, then traveled to the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art from February 16 to May 26, 2013, and will travel to Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas, from June 28 to September 30, 2013. The exhibition is accompanied by a substantial catalogue, published by the Newark Museum and Pomegranate Communications, Inc., which includes five insightful essays by respected scholars in the field of 19th-century American art and culture.

Illustrations

Cover:
Abbott Handerson Thayer
Angel, 1887
Oil on canvas; 36 1/4 x 28 1/8 inches
Smithsonian American Art Museum;
Gift of John Gellatly 1929.6.112

William Merritt Chase (1849-1916)
Idle Hours, ca. 1894
Oil on canvas; 25 1/2 x 35 1/2 inches
Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

Seymour Joseph Guy (1824-1910)
A Bedtime Story, 1878
Oil on canvas; 34 x 27 1/2 inches
Private Collection

John George Brown (1831-1913)
Swinging on the Gate, ca. 1878-1879
Oil on canvas; 22 1/2 x 14 3/8 inches
Taubman Museum of Art; Acquired with funds provided by the Horace G. Fralin Charitable Trust 2003.003

Winslow Homer (1836-1910)
Reading by the Brook, 1879
Oil on canvas; 15 7/8 x 22 3/4 in.
Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis Tennessee; Memphis Park Commission Purchase 43.22
(above: William Merritt Chase (1849-1916), *Idle Hours*, ca. 1894, Oil on canvas; 25 1/2 x 35 1/2 inches. Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas)

(above: Seymour Joseph Guy (1824-1910), *A Bedtime Story*, 1878, Oil on canvas; 34 x 27 1/2 inches. Private Collection)

(above: John George Brown (1831-1913), *Swinging on the Gate*, ca. 1878-1879, Oil on canvas; 22 1/2 x 14 3/8 inches. Taubman Museum of Art; Acquired with funds provided by the Horace G. Fralin Charitable Trust 2003.003)
About the author

Dr. Holly Pyne Connor is Curator of 19th-Century America Art, at the Newark Museum. Angels & Tomboys: Girlhood in 19th-Century American Art was curated by Dr. Connor.

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