

Arts & Culture

Seen and Heard: Victorian Children in the Frame. Guildhall Art Gallery. Until 28th April 2019



Children have not always been encouraged to express themselves and used to be under strict discipline in school and at home. In Victorian times, many from poor families worked from an early age, in appalling conditions for endlessly long hours.

Artists have a long tradition of painting children and the Exhibition *Seen and Heard: Victorian Children in the Frame* gives a visual narrative of how attitudes to children of all classes changed dramatically during the Victorian Era. This Exhibition brings together Art and Social History for the first time.

Fifty paintings, which include works by John Everett Millais, Thomas Webster, Augustus E Mulready and James Clarke Hook, explore the changing conception of childhood in Victorian times.

In the early 19th century children were regarded as small adults and appeared in artworks as props on a stage set. They were merely an extension of families dominated by a Patriarch. There was no interaction between the figures and the children had no individuality.

Gradually the perception of children changed with a social revolution. Many new Laws and Acts were passed for the benefit of children. They were now treated with empathy and began to have rights to a carefree childhood with freedom to learn, explore and play. The much needed Acts passed to alleviate the brutality in the Victorian age, especially to the poor, included The Mines Act of 1842 which banned all boys under ten years and all women and girls from working in the Mines. In 1848 the Public Health Act was passed which established a Central Board of Health in response to the cholera epidemic. In 1851 Henry Mayhew published *London Labour and London Poor* after interviewing child workers. The Elementary Education Act was passed in 1880 to make school compulsory up to the age of ten.

There were further reforms, help from charities and philanthropists. The children now had a voice.

A new genre of art developed. Idealised works were filled with scenes of happiness at home and children playing. Queen Victoria had nine children and they were in the public eye. Family life values were promoted which led to concern for children of the poor. There was a cultural wind of change in the treatment of all children.

A genre of painters of poverty arose. City merchant Charles Gassiot bought many works of this type in the 1840s. At this time poverty was sometimes

equated to laziness rather than inequality. Thomas Kennington opened the New English Art Club in 1885 and painted many compelling images of poor children.

Referring to the new genre, Katherine Pearce, the Curator, said "I think what drives Victorian artists in general is not so much sentimentalism, it's actually emotionalism. They're more interested in investigating feelings not just for its own sake.

Writers of social novels contributed to the new concept of children. For example, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. They made Politicians and public aware of the plight of poor children.

Studies of children in the Exhibition are thought provoking. Some are from the Guildhall's own collection, others are on loan from major British collections such as Tate Britain and the Royal Academy.

Augustus E Mulready's *Remembering Joys That Have Passed Away* (1873) is particularly evocative. It shows a young bare headed boy with a little girl, in the snow, gazing wistfully at a large poster of a pantomime, with a 'last night' notice stuck to it. In front is a box labelled 'pipe lighters. 4 boxes for 1d'.

Theophile Emmanuel Duverger's *Alone* is a remarkable study of childhood. A small boy sits in a chair struggling to tie his boot lace. The other boot lies on the floor. He is by the window and the light shines on him to help him with his task.

I liked James Clarke Hook's *Word from the Missing*. It is a good example of interaction between the figures. A boy stands at the edge of the sea holding up a bottle in which there is a note. A smaller girl rises up to have a closer look. The viewer wonders what the note said and one can sense the children's imagination working full time.

Thomas Webster's *The Frown* is an intriguing study. It shows a row of young boys sitting against a wall. They are all very individual. one wears a white apron and the light shines on him as he cries. Others interact with each other as they talk, no doubt plotting mischief! Set a little back is a child wearing a dunce's hat. The artist has immortalised his pent up childish anger in his frown.

My First Sermon by John Everett Millais is very touching. It reveals a young girl dressed in red with a perfectly straight hat, sitting bolt upright with her feet on a hassock. It is hard to tell what she is thinking. The same girl is painted again a year later, with her legs hanging down and her hat beside her. She is asleep.

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Dress Portrait: Molly Goddard and Sarah Edwards

Chelsea Space
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Until 1 March 2019



Molly Goddard's BA fashion show at Somerset House in 2015 took the form of life class at a posh girls' school, with a well-upholstered, middle-aged, male nude model surrounded by girls in tulle frocks who had been to the student ball the night before, had not slept, and went straight to class. It was a sensation. She was on her way. Her unique approach, in collaboration with her mother, the photographer and set designer, Sarah Edwards, ensured she was included in 'Vogue's Most Unforgettable Fashion Shows Of All Time' and Alix Browne's *Runway: The Spectacle of Fashion*, as well as winning the prestigious *Vogue Designer Fashion Fund* in May 2018. Her dresses are bold, voluminous and fun, sometimes using tens of metres of fabric in a single item. One such dress, in shocking, shocking pink, was worn by Jodie Comer as the insouciant assassin Villanelle in BBC's *Killing Eve*, standing in *Place Vendôme* in Paris in black Balenciaga boots. She also dresses Rihanna in a similarly spectacular style. Her mum's photographs capture the texture, translucency and volume of the fabrics, as well as their exuberance. Apart from a couple of sample frocks from Molly's archive, the exhibition comprises black and white and colour photographs stuck to the walls, with a few in frames. Yet another quality show from Donald Smith and his team at Chelsea Space, within a sugar-cube's throw from Tate Britain.

Don Grant