

PAINTINGS OF CHILDREN

Art has given people an expression in which to tell or explain themselves and their surroundings or beliefs. Art also teaches history. Throughout the ages, children have been a favorite subject for painters. This series of pictures will explain how children have been viewed by society, parents, and adults throughout history.

PICTURE: Children Playing on the Beach, Artist: Mary Cassatt
Development of children was once divided into two stages: the first being infancy, which was the longest, and then adulthood.

PICTURE: Portrait of a Boy, Artist: Unknown
Children were depicted in art as early as the second century. This picture was drawn by an unknown artist from Egypt. The boy's name is Eutyches. The painting is drawn on a piece of wood paneling. All materials were made from natural materials such as clay, charred bone or soot, chalk, or oyster shells. Paints were burned in by melting beeswax over a hot fire and combining it with various pigments. When the painting was complete, the artist passed a hot metal pan over the surface to burn in the colors. This permanently bonded them to the wood. Notice the clothing of the period. This white robe with a black stripe also bears a Greek inscription on the front that spells the child's name. The portrait was found in Eutyches tomb, wrapped with his mummy.

PICTURE: Edward VI as a Child, Artist: Hans Holbein
Hans Holbein of Germany is the artist of this painting. He became the official painter of England's King Henry VIII in 1536. In this portrait of a 2-year-old, you will see that children were considered as miniature adults. They were often given their lifelong nobility or career from the time of birth. As you see, children were dressed as miniature adults, with the royal robe and hat and a somewhat childlike face. This painting used real gold and a costly red pigment; the materials suitable for the son of a king.

PICTURE: Giovanni De'Medici at Eighteen Months, Artist, Agnolo Bronzino
Children were often given their birthright at the time of birth. For Giovanni De'Medici, his inheritance was to become a clergyman. His older brother was to inherit his father's title. Giovanni's wine-colored tunic symbolized the red robes worn by Cardinals of the Catholic Church. Notice that the baby's amused expression seems more adult than childlike. His tousled hair and chubby hands contrast the stiff pose and elaborate costume. Bronzino referred to this child as an angel. Throughout the Middle Ages, children were characterized as cherubs or angels. Adults naturally imposed adult standards for children's behavior, not seeing any significant contribution that children made to their own development.

PICTURE: Children's Games, Artist: Pieter Brueghel

Pieter Brueghel often detailed the joys and sorrow of Flemish peasantry in his work. For sixteenth-century farmers, life consisted of labor, high taxes, and war. Young people worked as hard as their parents. When work came to a halt for celebrations and holidays, children played as hard as they worked. This is the message of Brueghel's painting. In this picture, over 80 games or activities are shown. Many of the games you see are marbles, rolling hoops, and blindman's bluff. If we had a closer view of this picture, we would see older faces on each child. Bruegel shows his sympathy for peasant children forced to share adult responsibilities.

PICTURE: Embryo in the Womb, Artist: Leonardo da Vinci

During the Renaissance, many artists began studying human anatomy and the human body. There was much debate and speculation on the nature of children and how they should be reared. The concept of original sin was introduced and argued that all children were born bad and that through parenting, children would gain their salvation. Leonardo da Vinci was dedicated to art and science. At this point we see the introduction of perspective in paintings and sculpture. The Embryo in the Womb is one of hundreds of drawings and notes that da Vinci wanted to make into an encyclopedia. It has been used by anatomists and biologists to provide "sight and insight."

PICTURE: Industrial Revolution, Artist: Unknown

During this age, people were believed to be things and were full of enlightenment. Art finally returned to reason, nature, and morality. Because of the American Revolution and the French Revolution, many children were put into factories and used as cheap labor. Children worked long hours, were given hard labor, and were in very unsafe and unhealthy conditions. Children were often looked upon as objects to be used to increase status or resources. Male children were more valuable because of their physical ability to work hard on farms and in fields. There was also the philosophy that parents should have many children because so many children died in childhood that only a few would be left to grow into adulthood. Many children died at birth; later many were lost because of childhood diseases and poor sanitation conditions. By the end of the seventeenth century John Locke argued that children were not innately bad but were blank tablets on which to develop experience and characteristics. Locke believed that childhood experiences were important factors to becoming adults and directly affected their characteristics as adults. He encouraged parents to spend time with children and to help them become contributing members of society.

PICTURE: Baby in Red High Chair, Artist: Unknown

During the 1800s, children finally reached a level of simplicity. This artist captured the angelic expression of a sleeping infant. Notice the delicate features of the baby's skin and hair. The painter emphasized the softness of the baby, its clothing, and its blanket. The technique used here looks very modern even though it was completed almost 200 years ago. This was the very beginning of American Folk Art. During the eighteenth century, Rousseau agreed with Locke that children were not bad, but he did not consider them as blank tablets, either. He said, "Children are inherently good. They should be permitted to grow naturally with little parental monitoring."

PICTURE: Calm Morning, Artist: Frank W. Benson

At the beginning of the 1900s, children began to be looked upon as being different from adults. They had different needs than adults. They needed different clothing, food, and different activities. Many men began studying children as a science and formed the basic child development theories that are used today. In this painting, Benson posed three of his children to use traditional perspective, creating an illusion of depth and space.

PICTURE: Nellie With Toy, Artist: Otto Dix

In this painting, painted in 1925, Dix shows us the emotions of a young child struggling to assert her will. In front of her she shows her power through her toys, the wooden ring, and pink ball. She confronts the viewer with tears in her eyes as she challenges her authority. This shows man's understanding of the wide range of children's emotions and the need for them to learn, grow, and understand.

PICTURE: Girl on Balcony, Artist: Fernando Botero

Today children are looked upon as funny, cute, tiresome, busy, curious, and difficult. Botero, in 1983, captured the gentle sense of humor of children in his majestic figure of this young girl. Notice her shape is almost balloon like. Also notice the tiny facial features and small hands. Botero did not mean for this painting to be satirical or mean but to capture this figure in an almost cartoon-like fashion.

As you can see, man and children have come a long way. There is much to study before understanding the ever-changing behavior of children on their journey to adulthood. In the last 150 years, child development philosophies have changed dramatically. We now consider childhood a highly eventful and unique period of life. We know that children pass through distinct periods in which special skills are mastered and new life tasks are confronted. Childhood is a special time of growth and change.