THE YOUNGEST MODEL

By BEATA VON ERDBERG

OURS has been called the Century of the Child, not only because children are being treated as "people" and given every opportunity to develop according to their individuality, but also because we wistfully adore the eagerness for life and the straightforwardness of all impulses in a child's nature. Even in judging adults, casual remarks about acquaintances or the description of a character in a novel often bring out some childish trait, some enthusiasm or unspoiled instinct, some childish mannerism unconsciously retained, and prize it as the chief source of that person's charm and attraction.

If we are honest, we must admit this: We did not discover the importance of children (just anybody's children, apart from our own) until we became rather skeptical about our grown-up importance. Primitive people may love their offspring just as dearly as the lioness and the modern mother, yet to them childhood is just a stage, to be left behind as quickly as possible. To be able to protect and feed oneself and to choose a mate, that alone was the full realization of life. But when this became difficult even for many able grownups, when the struggle of life did not exalt man but weary him, then he looked back and remembered that once all life had seemed wonderful to him, and that its mysteries had held no terror, only promise. Man began to envy children their wisdom without knowledge, their character without morals. And he listened eagerly to the revolutionary message: "The Kingdom of God belongs to such as these."

The first artist who ever made the image of a child for its own sake took a step of supreme importance. And it was not in the dim past that this happened. In Egypt and Mesopotamia, in ancient India and China, artists were not given to regarding the child in itself as an attractive model. It might creep in and take its modest place in mass scenes or in illustrations, where iconography demanded its presence to make a certain episode complete. Had not Christianity made so much of the Nativity, thereby giving prominence to an infant, and elevated the Virgin Mother of God to a high place of worship, Western art would have had to wait even longer for the baby to toddle into its berth in art.

It was a slow backward process, that of reducing the full-blown conception of the Savior to the infant who as yet knows nought of good and evil. Medieval Madonnas offer believers precocious little boys who are quite capable of consciously performing the act of blessing. It was the Renaissance which gave Christ the same start in life as all of us enjoy in the blissful self-sufficiency of babyhood, the promise of a great future being expressed solely in the picture of his Mother. As the Madonna takes on the features of a human mother, the child becomes her helpless babe: nothing extraordinary in the eyes of others but the whole world to her. He plays children's games with little St. John and the angels; he is allowed a respite in the safe world of un­ fledged humanity. His attraction lies not in his mission but in the way he reminds you of all the children you have known and loved. The Savior, apparently unaware of his powers, appeals to us for love and protection. But behind his carefree play and confident slumber looms the specter of his mission, making his helplessness even more appealing to us.

If a child was portrayed because of some outstanding deed, it had acted beyond its years. It was, therefore, natural to depict it as resembling an adult more closely than ordinary children of the same age would. If a boy wore a crown and theoretically held the reins of government, if a little princess was betrothed to a foreign prince for reasons of state, their portraits would reflect their unnatural status in life rather than the childish incompetencies which endear them to their nurse. It was not until the last few centuries that artists realized that the contrast between an exalted position and a representative yet unfitted and unspoiled might give a poignant charm to the picture.
Although this boy painted by Chardin (1699-1779) is a complete gentleman in his appearance, he still finds spinning a top more attractive than his books.

CHILDREN OF ALL AGES

The medieval artist depicted the Christ Child (1230) with all the serenity Jesus showed in later life.

Nine different attitudes toward the serious business of drawing a flower, as seen by a modern Japanese painter.

Howling and struggling does not help naughty Cupid when Saturn clips his wings (18th cent.)
Prince Don Balthasar Carlos, by Velasquez (1636).
The combination of a generalist’s pose and a soft childish face is not very convincing, but it expresses the hopes of an empire.

Peter Paul Rubens’ portrait of his son Nikolas (1619). All the artist wished to show here was the child as it appeared in the eyes of its loving parent.

With the aid of modern photography a new element enters into the art of portraying children: the capturing of the elusive fleeting emotion passing over the child’s face and the impulsive movement of the hands (Phot. Emil Menet).

In the mountain village of Bärenwald, Erzgebirge, poor peasants always keep their Infant Jesus (1673), little brother to their own babies, dressed in the best lace the district produces.
Contrast is one of the means by which artists achieve their effects. The contrast between two generations will be to the advantage of the child, and the family group picture is the place where the child shines. While primitive people are prompted by fertility magic to make only crude likenesses of women who are destined to bear children, civilized citizens proudly show off their offspring as a proof that their family tree is blessed. We are fond of photographs uniting three generations; grandparents and parents are the background for the child, the latest link in the chain, guaranteeing continuity.

Once the artists had “discovered” the child, they held on to such a valuable model; for there is no doubt that everybody loves to look at children for what they are, quite aside from sentimental or sensational circumstances. They can always evoke a smile; they cannot possibly be grim or offensive; and, while they may not have highly dramatic moments, they also avoid the tragic. They are sure to be charming both as individuals and as types.

It is no wonder that photography has developed a highly specialized field: portraits of children. Early photographic portraits were posed just as stiffly as the painted likenesses of royalty not yet in their teens, but today the photographer realizes that he has a great advantage over the artist: he can catch the fleeting playful gesture, never to be consciously repeated. The portrait painter can endow his picture with the sum total of personality impressions gained in personal talks or long sittings. His picture will then seem to be more completely the likeness of a finished individual than any set of snapshots in different moods. But to treat the child as a compound product of its moods is to emphasize the incompleteness of its person; while the impish smile tossed over its shoulder, or the grave preoccupation with which a new aspect of life is taken in, reveals the whole of the child’s nature.

We know that environment molds the character; it also brings out the character in a portrait. Chinese artists place their children in the surroundings in which they feel most at home. They put them into the garden, where the little tots are as completely one with nature as kittens and butterflies, who play with the same abandon. We like to bring out the sweet gravity of the little personage who has outgrown babyhood and finds life a serious game in which one must behave with decorum. The child-angel knows this too, as soon as it has passed beyond the romping stage and takes part in heavenly music.

Yet there is one favorite of Western art who is entirely without any sense of responsibility or family ties: the cherub. He is the personification of soft plumpness, endless pranks, and freedom from “good behavior.” Cherubs are children of all the elements, citizens of heaven and earth alike. Theirs is a wider scope of life, even though civilization has not illumined their earthly domain.

Revenge

An American marine in the Pacific was known among his comrades for his great faithfulness to his fiancée. But one day he received a letter in which his fiancée briefly informed him that she was marrying someone else and asked him to return her photograph. This was such a blow to the poor fellow that his comrades decided to avenge him. They organized a collection of all kinds of photos of girls, packed them into a big cardboard box, and sent them to the faithless one. On top lay a letter: “Please pick out your own photo and send me back the rest. I hate to say so, but I can’t remember which is you.”