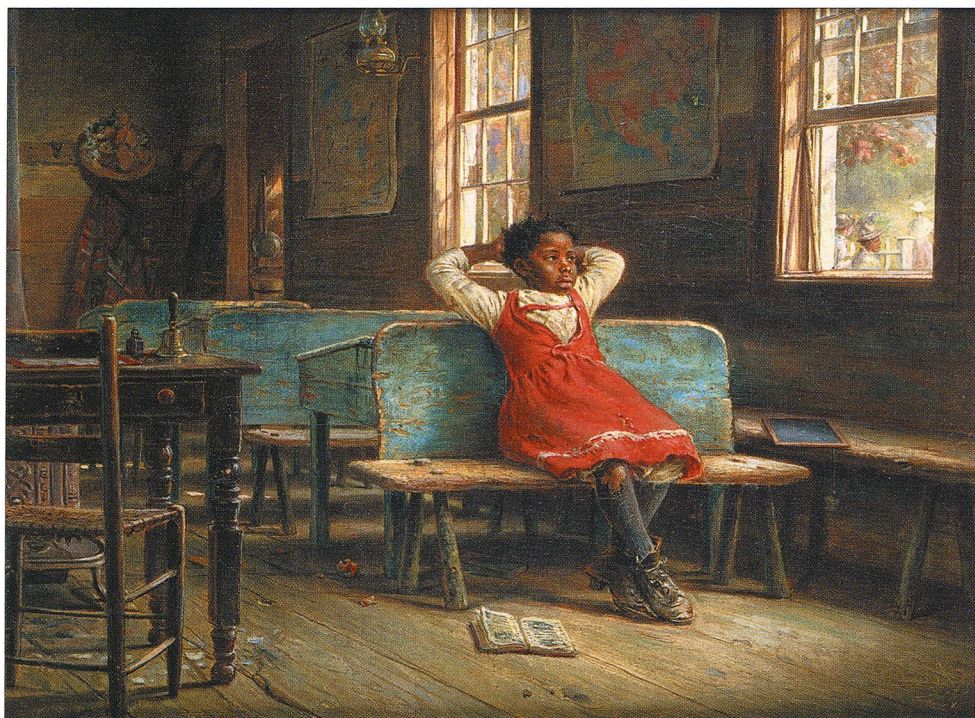


Angels and Tomboys: Picturing the American Girl

by Gail Leggio

The eighty images in “Angels and Tomboys: Girlhood in Nineteenth-Century American Art,” at the Newark Museum, are all worth looking at as documents of visual culture, and many of them command attention as autonomous artworks. One of the most formally compelling images is also one of the earliest, Ammi Phillips’s *Girl in a Red Dress*, c. 1835 (cover). Dressed as a miniature adult, like a Velázquez infanta, she sits primly in her puff-sleeved, elegant dress, with a charming brown-and-white dog at her feet. She holds a jewel-like strawberry in one hand, while the rest of the plant is crisply silhouetted against her skirt. The flatly painted red shape of the dress sings against her ivory skin and the dark backdrop. The picture fully justifies the modernist enthusiasm for Folk Art.

The exhibition, in general, however, emphasizes historical content. In the handsome catalogue, organizing curator Holly Pyne Connor and contributors



Edward Lamson Henry, *Kept In*, 1889

FENIMORE ART MUSEUM, COOPERSTOWN, NEW YORK

Sarah Burns, Barbara Dayer Gallati and Lauren Lessing explore the iconography of the girl child, from baby to adolescent, during an American century of profound change.¹ The authors tend to focus on evolving social norms and family dynamics, as well as stylistic shifts. But the girls themselves often assert themselves in surprising ways, as in Eastman Johnson's (1824–1906) *Winter, Portrait of a Child* (1879). Johnson depicts his daughter, Ethel, at nearly life-size, close to the picture plane. Her black winter coat boldly silhouetted against a roughly painted snowbank, her cheeks rosy in the brisk air, she holds the reins of a sled in one hand and gazes confidently at the viewer. Spirited brushwork, a strong composition, a subject who seems as alive today as she did 133 years ago—there is nothing old-fashioned about Johnson's picture.

Other artists in the exhibition are not as accomplished at time travel, but their careers are nonetheless fascinating. Lilly Martin Spencer (1822–1902) enjoyed great commercial success with her sentimental and satirical works, widely promulgated through the vigorous print market. She bore thirteen children, seven of whom survived, and was the principal breadwinner of the family (her husband was frequently unemployed). *The Home of the Red, White and Blue* (c. 1867–68) is a fairly congested genre scene—dominant mother in white, children of various ages, a dozy grandpa and a stereotypical organ grinder with monkey, picnicking in an arcadian space—that holds little formal interest. But curator Connor's matriarchal reading opens a fresh perspective on the patriotic theme, emphasized by the dress colors of the central group and by the tattered American flag in the foreground: "By placing the sewing box near the torn flag, Spencer indicates that mother and daughters will repair and restore the ravaged nation."²

Spencer's work was best known through lithographic copies, such as Jean Baptiste Adolphe LaFosse's pair *The Young Teacher* and *The First Polka* (1858). The first shows a demure little girl with a dog; the second, a naughty boy annoying a cat—the usual gender stereotypes, Connor points out. In her essay, however, Burns examines lithographs she finds potentially subversive, such as *Grandpa's Prodigies*. In this 1860 engraving by T. Rogers, after Spencer, a boy with a bit in his mouth plays horsey; the rider is his little sister, brandishing a whip. A well-dressed old gentleman looks on indulgently. Burns suggests: "Spencer couched her message in visual terms. It was up to viewers to decide whether the artist's images of girls acting up, and out, were cautionary or celebratory."³ The Victorians were not averse to undermining social conventions and moral pieties, as the headstrong Alice's adventures in Lewis Carroll's *Wonderland* amply demonstrate. What Burns calls "the push-pull between liberation and constraint"⁴ was certainly at play in the self-consciously independent United States. Images reflect the complexities of the world in which they were made. They can also transcend the immediate circumstances of that world. Nineteenth-century visual culture provided source material for twentieth-century artists in the collage novels of the surrealist Max Ernst and the

witty little books of Edward Gorey, to name just two.⁵

Sentimentality and the fetishization of innocence characterize the nineteenth-century cult of childhood. Wordsworth's vision of the infant arriving in the world "trailing clouds of glory" had been, in large part, domesticated. Yet, through the twenty-first-century hindsight, perhaps, of the exhibition's organizers, the girls depicted seem remarkably self-possessed. Two works by the British-born John George Brown (1831–1913) are good examples. In *The Cider Mill* (1880), five little girls perch on a trestle under a tree, amid the barrels and other apparatus of the mill. All are eating apples and looking straight at the viewer. There may be a suggestion of little Eves in this charming scene, but the chief pleasures of the picture are the expert play of sun and shadow and the individuality of the girls. In *Swinging on the Gate* (c. 1878–79), Brown captures the energy of a fresh-faced little blonde making a plaything of a barrier.

Swinging on the Gate depicts a tomboy outdoors, in a rural setting, but even girls in more genteel circumstances can radiate the authority of a strong personality. Frank Benson's (1862–1951) *Gertrude* (1899) shows an elegantly dressed young lady—in a ruffled white dress with a blue sash, neat brown stockings and shoes—seated in a white rocking chair. The interior is simplified to almost-abstract panels in shades of brown and cream, with the silhouette of a spindly-legged highboy sketched in on the left. The carefully controlled palette makes this a sophisticated painting, as does Benson's painterly touch—the way, for example, he differentiates the gauzy white of the dress from the glossy enamel white of the rocking chair. But the real focus is the face of Gertrude, grave and thoughtful as she gazes off to some distant point.

Intimations of interior life become more noticeable toward the turn of the century. Cecilia Beaux's (1855–1942) formal portraits of children are polished and stylish. In *Fanny Travis Cochran* (1887), Beaux plays the shiny brown of the young lady's hair against the velvety brown of the drapery backdrop, and the luscious lemon sash of the white dress against the deep violet of the spray of flowers in her hand. The overdressed toddlers of *Portrait of Harold and Mildred Colton* (1886–87) seem surprisingly determined, although, seated together on an elegant chair, their feet dangle high above the carpet, and they share the space with a large chinoiserie urn. *Dorothea in the Woods* (1897) seems more modern, both in the loose paint-handling and in the model's attitude. An adolescent in an embroidered peasant blouse and loose hair, she half-reclines in the grass, leaning against a thick-rooted tree. Her expression is wary, with her hands—expressive and somewhat awkward—in front of her, resting on the tree roots. The way the splotchy groundcover flattens out in the horizonless space and Dorothea's edgy beauty suggest European art, in the style of Gustav Klimt. Joseph DeCamp's (1858–1923) portrait of his fifteen-year-old daughter, *Sally* (c. 1907), is more obviously American. A contemporary critic praised the picture for capturing "the fresh, fearless, intelligent type so characteristic of our young Americans." It's a striking composition, given graphic punch by



Winslow Homer, *Reading by the Brook*, 1879

MEMPHIS BROOKS MUSEUM OF ART, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

the gauzy white sailor blouse and black tie. The girl's glossy brown hair and warm complexion establish an aura of health and beauty, but her introspective expression makes it clear she looks to the future fully aware of how complex her own role in it may be.

Girls reading is a theme throughout the exhibition, usually in a positive context, although some nineteenth-century moralists warned against the pernicious influence of novels. Dante had traced the fall of Paolo and Francesca to reading about Lancelot and Guinevere, and Balzac's Emma Bovary was a reader of romance novels that were a prelude to her own disastrous adultery. But books were also attributes of education and the joys of childhood imagination. In *A Bedtime Story* (1878), Seymour Joseph Guy (1824–1910) depicts an older sister reading from an illustrated book to two younger siblings as they lie, wide-eyed, in bed. Guy knows how to compose a picture and light a scene to enhance narrative drama. Neatly dressed in a brown frock trimmed in red, the storyteller raises one hand to emphasize some plot point, holding her audience rapt. Guy uses the quilted white coverlet, beautifully detailed, to focus the viewer's attention in the dimly lit room.

It's easy to understand why the curators chose five paintings by Guy, an artist who clearly deserves to be better known. In *Children in Candlelight* (1869),

perhaps originally known as *Who's There?*, an older girl holds a candle as she ventures into a dim hallway, a brave scout into the unknown, with her little brothers and mother behind her. As Gallati remarks, Guy creates “a palpable moment of suspense that metaphysically anticipated the girl’s passage from childhood to adolescence.”⁷ The artist employs chiaroscuro deftly in two other works that dramatize threshold experiences. In *Making a Train* (1867), a girl precociously vamps in a long adult dress. In *Dressing for the Rehearsal* (c. 1890), a nude girl stands on a chair, as her mother stoops to help her into her costume. A pair of ballet slippers lie on the floor. The wistful child holds onto ribbons that secure butterfly wings to her back. Lamplight casts an enormous butterfly shadow on the wall, a symbol of the metamorphosis she will undergo in puberty. Among the catalogue of winged personae, Guy has chosen to costume the girl not as an angel or even an innocently mischievous fairy, but as a more sophisticated and mysterious hybrid being. A modern viewer will find much to think about in this intriguing picture. I was reminded of A.S. Byatt’s wonderful novella “Morpho Eugenia,” about a Victorian naturalist, an obsessive collector of butterflies, who falls under the spell of a household of beautiful women and their mating rituals (*Angels and Insects*, Chatto & Windus, 1992).

The work of William Hahn (1829–87), a contemporary of Guy’s, looks old-fashioned by comparison. *Learning the Lesson (Children Playing School)*, from c. 1880, depicts a girl in a pinafore instructing a makeshift class. While teacher reads from her book, only the smallest child, with her slate and chalk, seems attentive. The two other girls on the bench whisper, and a boy standing behind them tries to disappear into a shadowy doorway. A dog on watch adds anecdotal charm. The rural porch, with its canopy of ivy, suggests a country setting, although a more impressive edifice rises in the distance. This kind of straightforward genre picture shows little interest in psychology or aesthetics. Edward Lamson Henry’s (1841–1919) *Kept In* (1889) is more interesting. A little African American girl, in a patched red dress, sits alone in the schoolroom. She has cast her textbook aside and looks longingly at the sunshine outside. The image strikes a balance between two themes: the historical importance of expanding literacy in the competitive environment of post-Civil War America, and the restlessness of the independent young thinker—Huck Finn being the canonical exemplar—chafing at the institutional restraints of school. The preeminent girl reader of nineteenth-century American culture was Jo March from Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868–69). The catalogue essayists cite her as an archetypal tomboy, but she is also the author’s alter ego, a free spirit who reads and writes for the pleasure and excitement of it.

The adventure of reading is encapsulated in a poem by Emily Dickinson (1830–86): “There is no Frigate like a Book/ To take us Lands away/ Nor any Coursers like a Page/ Of prancing Poetry.” Edward Charles Tarbell (1863–1938) finds a companionable silence in the private pursuits of two girls, in his *Josephine and Mercie* (1908). In a comfortable interior, a young woman

writes at a handsome desk, while a child sits in a armchair reading. The writer wears her hair up, a mark of adulthood, while the girl wears her hair loose, with a ribbon. It's a lovely scene, with soft light streaming through the sheer curtains. Winslow Homer (1836–1910), too, celebrates the private joy of books in *Reading by the Brook* (1879), a relatively simple but effective composition. Nature is reduced to three bands of loose brushwork—dark green for the grassy bank, pale yellow-green for the water and dappled, slightly brighter green for the more detailed foliage overhead. The girl is sketched with equal economy—brown dress, white pinafore, a dab of red paint for the ribbon in her hair. She has her back to the viewer, and she is completely absorbed in her book. We get a sense of her interior life.

As Gallati points out in her essay, many artists found models among members of their own families. While reasons of propriety and convenience are obviously at play, these close relationships yield some psychologically complex results. Gallati examines this issue in the work of three of the exhibition's best-known artists, Thomas Eakins (1844–1916), William Merritt Chase (1849–1916) and Abbott Handerson Thayer (1849–1921). In *Home Scene* (c. 1871), Eakins depicts his two sisters: Margaret, the elder, sits at a piano, with a kitten on her shoulder, and looks down at her little sister, Caddie, in a plaid dress, sprawled on the rug and drawing on a slate. Simply described, it sounds like a charming scene, with an emphasis on the importance of the arts in the domestic environment. But the body language is awkward, the shadows are menacing, the space is claustrophobic, and Margaret's face is drawn and her expression dour. The Strindbergian atmosphere may be attributed, in part, to family tragedy: Eakins's mother was insane and died in 1872. But psychic anxiety often shapes Eakin's handling of the figure, even when the subject matter is not biographically charged.

Chase and Thayer also suffered loss, but find more to celebrate in their families, emotionally and aesthetically. Three of Chase's children died in 1895, and family portraits from the period tend to be somber. His star model was his first child, Alice Dieudonné, named after her mother and called Cosy. In *Portrait of the Artist's Daughter* (c. 1895), Chase applies paint with a relaxed élan in the ruffled white dress and orange sash, the black-plumed straw hat and the warm russet backdrop, but Cosy's personality dominates the picture—her confident body language, distinctive heart-shaped face and direct gaze. *Mrs. Chase and Cosy* (c. 1894) is more informal. Mrs. Chase sits in a chair: she has been reading and keeps her finger in the book as her daughter comes up behind her and puts her arms around her mother's neck. *Portrait of the Artist's Daughter* has a regal quality, suggesting the vogue for Velázquez among painters in the later nineteenth century. The dark-toned *Mrs. Chase and Cosy*—the white of the girl's sleeves and the red of the mother's book and hair ornament are isolated bright notes—has the intimacy of a quietly observed family moment.

Chase's *Young Girl in Black: The Artist's Daughter in Mother's Dress* (c. 1897–98)



Charles Courtney Curran, *Lotus Lilies*, 1888

TERRA MUSEUM FOR AMERICAN ART, CHICAGO

depicts Cosy trying on the raiment of adulthood, a familiar theme. But while Guy's *Making a Train* and *Dressing for the Rehearsal* are genre-scene masquerades, Chase gives us a Spanish-style portrait. Cosy stands in front of a simple dark curtain, dressed in black, holding a fan, which dangles from her wrist. The drama is in her grave, pale face. Nineteenth-century artists were fond of dressing up their models. The Pre-Raphaelites created a pantheon of literacy and mythical characters: Elizabeth Siddal was John Everett Millais's Ophelia and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Beatrice; Jane Morris was William Morris's Guenevere and Rossetti's Proserpine. The photographer Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–79) posed relatives, friends and housemaids for her studies of angels and Tennysonian heroines.⁸

American artists tended to be less fanciful in their mythologizing, as a rule, but Thayer fused the personal and the symbolic in a remarkable way. He used his wife, Kate, and children as models for his angel and Madonna figures, which have an air of melancholy. Kate died of tuberculosis in 1891, after a long illness. Thayer's *Angel* (1887) depicts his daughter Mary, arms outstretched, with huge, stately white wings. Originally, she held a lily and a mandolin, but Thayer cropped them out, and the picture looks stronger—more modern, if you like—without the iconographic accoutrements. His *Virgin Enthroned* (1891) is clearly based on the Renaissance altarpiece format, as is *My Children* (*Mary, Gerald, Gladys Thayer*), from c. 1897. Gallati remarks that these compositional tropes, “calculated to conjure orthodox religious meaning,” are translated in Thayer's vision into tributes of the family he loved.⁹ Amid the candy-box cherubs of popular imagery, Thayer's unglamourized, down-to-earth, introspective angels stand out as immensely moving. His sketchy, big-gesture brushwork seems direct and honest, in ways we may think of as American. The two artists responsible for the most beautiful angels of the late nineteenth century have

very different concepts. Edward Burne-Jones's angels are hothouse Aesthetic Movement creatures who throb with decorative energy; Thayer's angels fuse symbolism and naturalism.

Turn-of-the-century America was becoming cosmopolitan, and Aestheticism was one of the influences at play. One of the loveliest pictures in the exhibition, Charles Courtney Curran's (1861–1942) *Lotus Lilies* (1888), is steeped in Aestheticism. Curran depicts two young women, his new bride, Grace Wickham, and cousin Charlotte Taylor, in a rowboat surrounded by a floating garden. The setting is Old Woman Creek, near the family's Lake Erie, Ohio, summer cottage, and Grace had carried water lilies in her wedding bouquet. With these historical facts in mind, you might expect a charming al fresco genre scene. But Curran gives us a kind of languorous daydream, a world engulfed by the huge blossoms, white, green-tinged chalices of translucence with deep-yellow centers. The boat, in forced perspective, is cut off by the lower edge of the picture, and a large, pale green umbrella encloses the girls in an enchanted space. Curran knows how to paint sunlight—in the nearly white sky and especially as it filters through petals and the white gauze of one girl's hat.

The exhibition focuses, for the most part, on the iconography of girlhood as it reflects comfortable middle-class culture, rather than the aristocratic strata frequented by expatriates John Singer Sargent and James McNeill Whistler. But the show acknowledges the social inequality that was the dark underside of the go-getting spirit of American prosperity. James Henry Cafferty's (1819–69) *The Encounter* (1859) dramatizes class differences: an elegantly dressed little girl—with sausage curls, a black coat that displays the hem of her red dress and a muff—is approached by a bedraggled woman in dusty brown, who maintains her anonymity by keeping her back to us. In Jacob Riis's (1849–1914) photographs, we find pauper children, like the wary-eyed girls of *I Scrubs* and *Girl and Baby at Doorstep* (both c. 1890). The rising photographic medium is represented by charming studio portraits of toddlers, as well, and by the self-aware artistry of Gertrude Käsebier's (1852–1934) *Blessed Art Thou Amongst Women* (1899). But Riis's documentary agenda expands the public view of childhood.

"Angels and Tomboys: Girlhood in Nineteenth-Century American Art" was on view September 13, 2012–January 6, 2013, at the Newark Museum, 49 Washington Street, Newark, New Jersey 07102. Newarkmuseum.org. It travels to the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, Tennessee (February 16–May 26, 2013) and Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas (June 28–September 30, 2013).

NOTES

1. Holly Pyne Connor, Sarah Burns, Barbara Dayer Gallati and Lauren Lessing, *Angels and Tomboys: Girlhood in Nineteenth-Century American Art* (Newark: Newark Museum and San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2012).

2. Connor, *ibid.*, p. 23.
3. Burns, *ibid.*, p. 97.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
5. For subversive art among nineteenth-century amateurs, see the exhibition “Playing with Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage,” curated by Elizabeth Siegel, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2010.
6. Lessing, *Angels and Tomboys*, cited, p. 108.
7. Gallati, *ibid.*, p. 65.
8. See Sylvia Wolf, et al., *Julia Margaret Cameron's Women* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).
9. Gallati, *Angels and Tomboys*, p. 75.