

# Children's Pleasures:

AMERICAN CELEBRATIONS OF CHILDHOOD



**Philemona Williamson** (American, b. 1952). *Boundary Crossing*, 2008, Oil on linen, 40 x 60 in., Courtesy of June Kelly Gallery, New York, NY

**February 2 – April 18, 2010**  
**Emily Lowe Gallery, South Campus**

Curated by Donna R. Barnes, Ed.D., Professor of Foundations, Leadership and Policy Studies, Hofstra University

Exhibition funding is provided by Hofstra University, New York State Council on the Arts, National Endowment for the Arts, the New York Community Bank Foundation, friends of Donna Barnes, and the Tilles Family.

The works in this exhibition, created by many renowned American artists, express continuity and change, mystery, dreams and innocence — all a part of childhood and its pleasures. The artists reveal the particular spirit of their era and in doing so convey the attitudes and beliefs in the nature of childhood that were prevalent during those times.

It is in the very process of taking time to look and reflect upon these works that the art teaches us something vital about ourselves, the past, and our current world relative to children and their delights and pastimes.

## AMERICAN CHILDHOOD'S COMING OF AGE: SOME STATISTICS TO CONSIDER ...

| U.S. Population <sup>1</sup> |            |      |             |
|------------------------------|------------|------|-------------|
| 1850                         | 23 million | 1950 | 152 million |
| 1900                         | 76 million | 2000 | 281 million |

| Toys  |   | Education  |   |
|---|---|--|---|
| 1840  | First mass-produced doll in U.S. <sup>2</sup>   | 1837   | Massachusetts creates first state child labor law requiring children under 15 to attend school for at least 3 months per year. <sup>4</sup> |
| 1869  | Milton Bradley creates The Checkered Game of Life®. <sup>2</sup>  | 1852   | Massachusetts passes the first U.S. compulsory education laws for children 6-16. <sup>4</sup>   |
| 1902-03   | Toy bears begin to be called "Teddy Bears" after President Theodore Roosevelt; Edwin Binney and C. Harold Smith produce the first box of Crayola® crayons. <sup>2</sup> | 1900   | Less than 14 percent of all Americans graduate from high school. <sup>5</sup>   |
| 1949-52   | Candy Land®, Legos®, Silly Putty® and Mr. Potato Head® all introduced. <sup>2</sup>   | 1918   | All states have passed laws requiring children to attend at least elementary school. <sup>4</sup>   |
| 1983  | Japanese company, Nintendo®, introduces Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), a home video game system, to the United States. <sup>2</sup>                               | 1999   | 83 percent of all Americans graduate from high school. <sup>5</sup>   |
| 2005  | Toy sales in the United States total about \$22.9 billion. <sup>3</sup>   |  |   |
| <sup>1</sup> Rosenberg, Matt, US Population Through History: The Growth of the Population of the United States. <a href="http://geography.about.com/od/obtainpopulationdata/a/uspop.htm">http://geography.about.com/od/obtainpopulationdata/a/uspop.htm</a> |   | <sup>4</sup> <a href="http://goodschoolspa.org/pdf/learn_factsheets/Timeline_PublicEducation_America.pdf">http://goodschoolspa.org/pdf/learn_factsheets/Timeline_PublicEducation_America.pdf</a>   |   |
| <sup>2</sup> <a href="http://www.history.com/content/toys/timeline">http://www.history.com/content/toys/timeline</a>  |   | <sup>5</sup> Fisk, Donald M. "American Labor in the 20th Century" by Bureau of Labor Statistics. Article originally printed in the Fall 2001 issue of <i>Compensation and Working Conditions</i> . Statistics excerpted from the <i>Report on the American Workforce</i> (U.S. Department of Labor, 2001). <a href="http://www.bls.gov/opub/cwc/cm20030124ar02p1.htm">http://www.bls.gov/opub/cwc/cm20030124ar02p1.htm</a> . |   |
| <sup>3</sup> Tsuruoka, Doug (January 5, 2007). "Toys: Not All Fun and Games." <i>Investor's Business Daily</i> .  |   |  |   |

## Labor

- 1900** Per capita income (in 1999 dollars) is \$4,200.<sup>6</sup> 19 percent of women of working age participate in labor force.<sup>5</sup>
- 1938** The National Child Labor Committee works for the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act, setting federal standards for child labor.<sup>7</sup>
- 1941** The Fair Labor Standards Act declared constitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court.<sup>7</sup>
- 1999** Per capita income is app. \$33,700.<sup>6</sup> 60 percent of women of working age participate in labor force.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Council of Economic Advisors, 2000, *Economic Report to the President*, 2000 (Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000) pp. 279.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/childlabor/about.htm>

## U.S. Life Expectancy Rates<sup>9</sup>

| Date  | Male            | Female          |
|-------|-----------------|-----------------|
|       | White/Non-white | White/Non-white |
| 1850* | 38 years /NA    | 40 years /NA    |
| 1900  | 48/32.5         | 53/35           |
| 1950  | 66/59           | 72/63           |
| 2000  | 75/68           | 80/75           |

\*1850 data is from Massachusetts only; white and non-white combined, the latter being about 1% of the total. Source: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States*.

<sup>9</sup> Department of Health and Human Services, National Center for Health Statistics, *National Vital Statistics Reports*, vol. 54, no. 19, June 28, 2006.

Web: [www.dhhs.gov](http://www.dhhs.gov) <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0005140.html>

## U.S. Infant Mortality Rates: out of 1000 live births<sup>8</sup>

| <u>Dates</u> | <u>White / Non-white</u> | <u>Dates</u> | <u>White / Non-white</u> |
|--------------|--------------------------|--------------|--------------------------|
| 1850         | 216 / 340                | 1950         | 27/44.5                  |
| 1900         | 110 / 170                | 2000         | 6 /14                    |

<sup>8</sup> <http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/haines.demography>



## BESSIE NICKENS

(American, 1905-2004)

*Doodlebug*, 1992

Oil on canvas

16 x 20 in.

Courtesy of the Estate of Bessie Nickens, New York, NY

Art © Estate of Bessie Nickens/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

Bessie Nickens provides visual steps with the use of repeated horizontal shapes created by the staggered bushes and the boy and dog searching for doodlebugs (also known as "pill," "armadillo," or "roly-poly" bugs). The dynamic diagonal line of the kite string leads the viewer to and from the main action of this painting — two boys enjoying a leisurely afternoon. Nickens' use of primary colors and shapes creates a scene of serenity. The action is frozen and a moment is captured.

STAN BRODSKY  
 (American, b. 1925)  
*Noah and Adam*, 1971  
 Oil on linen  
 30 x 24 in.  
 Courtesy of the artist

In the simplified forms of Noah and Adam, Stan Brodsky shares his subjects' names in the title of the work but offers no other visual details of them; instead, the artist presents the concept of "Every Child" at play. The flattened perspective and blocks of bright and dark colors are delineated by the diagonal line that splits the canvas. The division compartmentalizes each boy. This feeling of isolation is reinforced by their lack of engagement with one another and with the viewer.



ELIZABETH CATLETT

(American, b. 1915)  
*Playmates*, 1992  
 Color lithograph  
 15 3/4 x 13 5/8 in.  
 Courtesy of Sragow Gallery  
 Art © Elizabeth Catlett/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

In contrast to *Noah and Adam*, Elizabeth Catlett's *Playmates*, provides the viewer with an image of children who interact with each other during play. With primary colors dominating the scene, Catlett presents the quintessential childhood activity of playing ball. The action is all on the red ball; hands pointing toward it, ready to touch it. Blocks of color flatten the clothing and ball, making them appear as though pasted on. The modeling of the children's faces, hands and bare feet, however, adds details and volume, giving life to the subjects. Action also resides in the background which, with its lack of details, shadows and horizon remains a mysterious setting.



## THE BEARDSLEY LIMNER

(American, active 1785-1805)

*Little Boy in a Windsor Chair*, early 19th century

Oil on canvas, 32 x 25 in.

Montclair Art Museum, Museum Purchase,  
Lang Acquisition Fund

This portrait of an unknown boy is by a "limner" or itinerant artist who traveled and worked along the Old Boston Post Road, in Connecticut and Massachusetts, from about 1785 to 1805. The painter's actual identity and gender is unknown but she/he was given the name "The Beardsley Limner" based on the well-known portraits of Elizabeth and Hezekiah Beardsley.

In this painting we see a mild-mannered, adult-like child staring off into the distance, appearing to comply with his role as dutiful son. The painting, depicting the boy as a miniature adult, is characteristic of the early 19th century view of children. During this era "childhood" lasted only for the first several years of one's life before adult responsibilities set in. The posed portrait, most likely commissioned by his family, presents a well-heeled, educated boy who, with his book and studies, announces to the world his future role in society.



Photo Credit: Peter Jacobs, 1998

## WILLIAM J. McCLOSKEY

(American, 1859-1941)

*Feeding Dolly (If You Don't Eat It, I'll Give it to Doggie)*, 1890

Oil on canvas

20 x 24 in.

Collection of the Hudson River Museum,  
Gift of Mrs. Lillie H. Seaman, 25.97



In *Feeding Dolly*, the viewer not only glimpses the little girl engaged in make-believe play, but also her affluent surroundings. William McCloskey brings the viewer into the scene with the Oriental carpet leading from one corner of the canvas into the highlighted center of the painting – a stage upon which the young girl rehearses her future role as mother. The painting's title, *Feeding Dolly (If You Don't Eat it, I'll Give it to Doggie)*, reflects the expected obedience of Victorian children. The fine details of the interior, its objects, the girl's clothing and her actions document the Victorian era's concept of childhood in which innocent young girls live in their own protected world.

## FAIRFIELD PORTER

(American, 1907-1975)

*Laurence Playing Chess*, 1957

Oil on canvas

45 1/2 x 36 in.

Courtesy of the Parrish Art Museum,  
Southampton, NY

In this mid-20th century painting, the artist has the viewer peek in on Laurence's quiet moment playing chess. Porter presents an adolescent on the cusp of adulthood, with his long, gangly arms and undefined hands. Yet his crossed-legged position on the floor still speaks of childhood. The focused details are saved for the chess game, a possible metaphor for life's choices that lie ahead.



## ALICE NEEL

(American, 1900-1984)

*Olivia and the Red Hat*, 1982

Color lithograph

43 x 26 1/2 in.

Courtesy of Sragow Gallery

Alice Neel portrays her granddaughter, Olivia, front and center, with her swimwear fashion revealing the late 20th century era. Olivia's hands-on-hips, planted feet, and confrontational expression, could only appear in modern times where children no longer live according to the maxim that they are to be "seen but not heard." Neel conveys female strength and assertiveness through Olivia's lack of self-consciousness. The artist's expressionistic use of line and color assists in providing psychological insight, for which she is known.

## VICTORIA HUTSON HUNTLEY

(American, 1900-1971)

*Skating on the Pond*, 1936

Lithograph

8 11/16 x 12 15/16 in.

Hofstra University Museum

Gift of Daniel Mason

HU77.97

This familiar American outdoor winter scene of figure skaters on a rural pond is set in the midst of the Great Depression. Huntley depicts lightness still to be found, however, in simple childhood pleasures. The circular movement of the skaters creates an orbit of rhythm on the pond, enveloping the viewer in the young people's enjoyment.



Photo Credit: Rick Odell, 2009



## LOUISA ARMBRUST

(American/Canadian, b. 1972)

*Free Range Hockey—Melee #1*, 2008

Acrylic on canvas

30 x 40 in.

Courtesy of the artist

In wonderful contrast in time, style and content to Huntley's winter scene, Louisa Armbrust presents a 21st century group of hockey players in a melee (the reason for the melee remains unknown). With the clip-art-like sticks tossed on the ground, and helmets and mittens scattered, the scene is one of ensuing chaos. Even some trees, on the ground like fallen soldiers, have been caught in the ruckus. The game before us shatters the notion of teamwork and play and instead makes the viewer question the definition of fun. As though caught in a winter white-out, the scene's setting is obscure and undefined; the players no longer abiding by the rules of the game.



## WILLIAM SIDNEY MOUNT

(American, 1807-1868)

*The Novice*, 1847

Oil on canvas

29 7/8 x 24 7/8 in.

The Long Island Museum of American Art,  
History & Carriages, Museum Purchase, 1962

Long Island artist William Sidney Mount is credited with inventing American genre painting (scenes of everyday life). This richly detailed painting, typical of his work, glorifies the rustic outdoors and the American ideal of the common person. In this triangular composition expressing the bonds of friendship, Mount captures three rosy-cheeked country boys exploring a fife - their mouths open as they are engrossed in the excitement of learning.

Mount's composition engages light, line, color and form suggesting the European masters he emulated. The painting's content, however, is very American - boys eagerly discovering and learning on their own in the outdoors. The work embodies the American Transcendentalist view that children were innately pure and good, corrupted only by adult society. *The Novice* provides insight into the mid-19th century concept of childhood and nationhood where teacher and learner are one and the same, and all can be mastered.



## NORMAN ROCKWELL

(American, 1894-1978)

*Slim Finnegan*, 1916

Oil on linen

24 x 22 in.

Courtesy of the Norman Rockwell Museum, NRM.1987.02

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Rockwell presents a Huck Finn-like impression with this illustration for a *Saturday Evening Post* story by Ellis Parker Butler. The scene is the epitome of uncensored, unrestricted childhood play with its potential for mischief. The use of shadow and light heightens the curiosity of the viewer: What are these boys up to? What is the face drawn on the door? And what is being guarded? The boy with his rifle along with the dog keeps the viewer at bay, daring us to stop their fun.



LILY HARMON  
(American, 1912-1998)  
*The Donkey Game*, 1947  
Oil on canvas  
62 1/2 x 36 in.

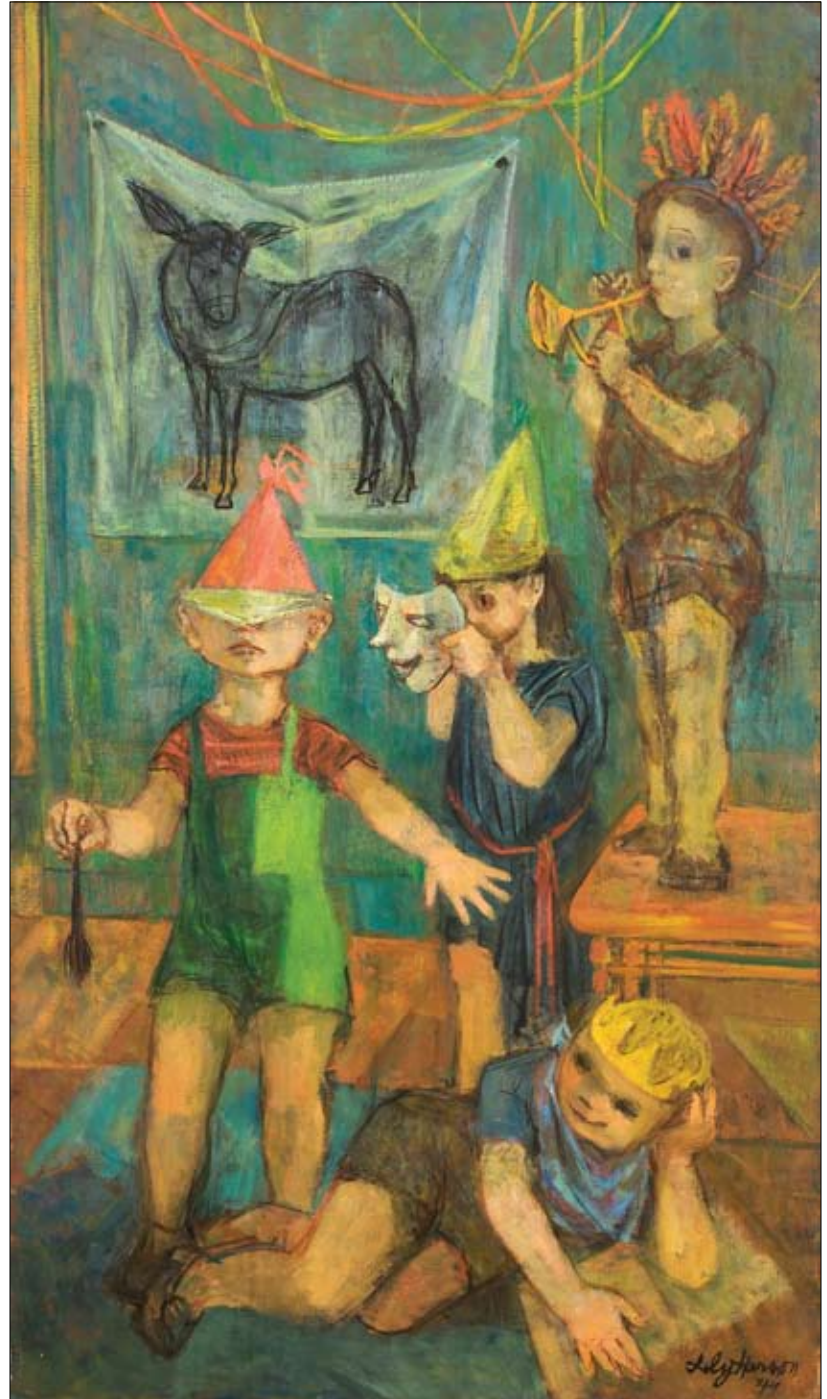
Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers,  
The State University of New Jersey.

Gift of the artist.

Art © Estate of Lily Harmon/Licensed by VAGA,  
New York, NY

Harmon's vignette of a birthday party draws in the viewer who wonders what will happen next. Four children occupy themselves with their own distractions: playing a toy horn, trying on a mask, daydreaming or playing the popular "Pin the Tail on the Donkey" game. Color and line provide a feeling of activity heightened by the children's staggered positions, from floor to table top. Lack of adult supervision appears to have freed the subjects in their childhood play.

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## RESOURCES

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### EXHIBITIONS/WEB SITES

*American ABC: Childhood in 19th-Century America*, The Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University, February 1 through May 7, 2006.  
<http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/6aa/6aa39.htm>

*The New Child: British Art and the Origins of Childhood, 1730-1830*, University Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive, UC Berkeley, August 23 - November 19, 1995.  
<http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/projects/newchild/>



### BOOKS

Chudacoff, Howard P. *Children at Play: An American History*. New York: New York University Press (2008)

Fass, Paula and Mary Mason, editors. *Childhood in America*. New York: New York University Press (2000)

Luke, Tim. *Toys from American Childhood, 1845-1945*. Cumberland, Maryland: Portfolio Press (2001)

Perry, Claire. *Young America: Childhood in 19th-Century Art and Culture*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press in association with the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University (2006)

Thank you for visiting the Hofstra University Museum.

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**William Merritt Chase** (American, 1849-1916), *Alice in the Mirror*, c. 1895, Oil on canvas, Courtesy of the Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, NY

