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Kid Size: The Material World of Childhood

An Exhibition Review

Abigail A. Van Slyck

Kid Size: The Material World of Childhood. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut, April–August 2004; Oklahoma City Museum of Art, Oklahoma City, December 2004–March 2005; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, April–September 2005.

Alexander von Vegesack, Jutta Oldiges, and Lucy Bullivant, eds. *Kid Size: The Material World of Childhood*. Milan: Skira editore; Weil am Rhein, Ger.: Vitra Design Museum, 1997. 315 pp.; 492 illustrations, bibliography. \$45.00.

CHILDREN ARE EVERYWHERE, especially in the museum world where exhibitions on the material culture of childhood have been increasingly cropping up since 1990. In that year, the Canadian Centre for Architecture mounted what would prove to be the first in a series of exhibitions featuring architectural toys and games; the seventh installation, *Toys and Transport*, closed in 2001. Although relatively small (most featured between eighteen and thirty objects), each of these exhibitions was accompanied by a slim volume containing a thoughtful essay by an architect or architectural historian. Also focused on toys was *Kid Stuff: Great Toys from Our Childhood*. Organized by the Berkshire Museum in Pittsfield, Massachu-

setts, this exhibition of more than two hundred toys opened in 1999 and has been traveling nationally ever since.

Children's summer camps have also attracted the attention of museum curators. *A Worthy Use of Summer: Jewish Summer Camping in America* debuted in 1993 at the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia, and in 1999 *Summer Camp* opened at the Museum of Our National Heritage (now the National Heritage Museum) in Lexington, Massachusetts. More recently, the Adirondack Museum in Blue Mountain Lake, New York, organized "A Paradise for Boys and Girls": *Children's Camps in the Adirondacks*, on display through the summer of 2004.

Local history museums have also gotten into the act, with such exhibitions as *Seen and Not Heard: Facets of Childhood in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans* at the Historic New Orleans Collection (1998–99). Others in this vein include *Dressing for a New York Childhood*, organized by the Museum of the City of New York (2001); *Grow Up! The Derby Childhood Experience*, on display at the Industrial Museum in Derbyshire, England (2003–4); and *Growing Up in Montreal*, which opened at the McCord Museum of Canadian History in fall 2004.

Broader chronologically and conceptually was *KiDS! 200 Years of Childhood*, an exhibition at Winterthur from 1999 to 2001. Focusing on the American context between 1700 and 1900, *KiDS!* used paintings, prints, books, toys, furniture, and other objects to demonstrate how adult perceptions of children affected the texture of children's lives at home, at school, and at play as well as how industrialization dramatically altered those perceptions. The exhibition's British counterparts include *A Century of Childhood* (at the Preservation Trust Museum, St. Andrew's, Scotland, May 29–October

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The author thanks Tom Denenberg for his help in identifying the contributions of the Wadsworth Atheneum staff to the exhibition on display in Hartford and Trina Bowman for her assistance in securing illustrations.

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Fig. 1. Installation, *Kid Size: The Material World of Childhood*, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Conn. (Courtesy of Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art.)

2004) and *Childhood: From Perambulators to PlayStation* (at the Royal Pump House Museum, Harrogate in 2004–5). Somewhat comparable in scope is *Archaeologies of Childhood: The First Years of Life in Roman Egypt*, on display at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology at the University of Michigan, 2003–4.

Artistic representations of childhood—a distinct but related topic—have also been highlighted in a number of exhibitions in the last decade. These include *The New Child: British Art and the Origins of Modern Childhood, 1730–1830*, organized by the University Art Museum in Berkeley, California, in 1995; *Fair and Free: Images of Childhood, 1824–1992* at the National Academy Museum in New York in 1997–98; *The Darker Side of Playland: Childhood Imagery in the Logan Collection* at San Francisco’s Museum of Modern Art in 2000–2001; *Growing Up: Childhood in American and Native American Art* at the Montclair Art Museum in Montclair, New Jersey, in 2004; and *Coming of Age in Ancient Greece: Images of Childhood from the Classical Past* at the Getty Center in 2004 as well.

Kid Size: The Material World of Childhood might be considered the blockbuster of this genre (fig. 1). Organized by the Vitra Museum in Weil am Rhein,

Germany, *Kid Size* spans four centuries, touches on five continents, and features 130 objects on loan from multiple museums and private collections. After opening in 1997 at the Kunsthal in Rotterdam—a Rem Koolhaas–designed building that may be one of the hippest venues in Europe—it started an extensive tour, traveling to museums in Switzerland, Germany, Croatia, Denmark, Norway, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, and Spain. The North American leg of the tour began in the spring of 2004 at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut; it is currently scheduled to travel through the fall of 2005, with stops at the Oklahoma City Museum of Art and the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh. True, the exhibition involves neither advance reservations nor long lines, but the massive and lavishly illustrated catalogue signals the organizers’ aspirations to define the field for years to come.

At one level, this flood of exhibitions on the material culture of childhood seems to be a natural outgrowth of scholarly trends. Scholars from a range of disciplinary perspectives have brought renewed vigor to the history of childhood—hosting conferences, editing collections of essays, launching encyclopedia projects, and producing monographs in quantity. Equally important, however,

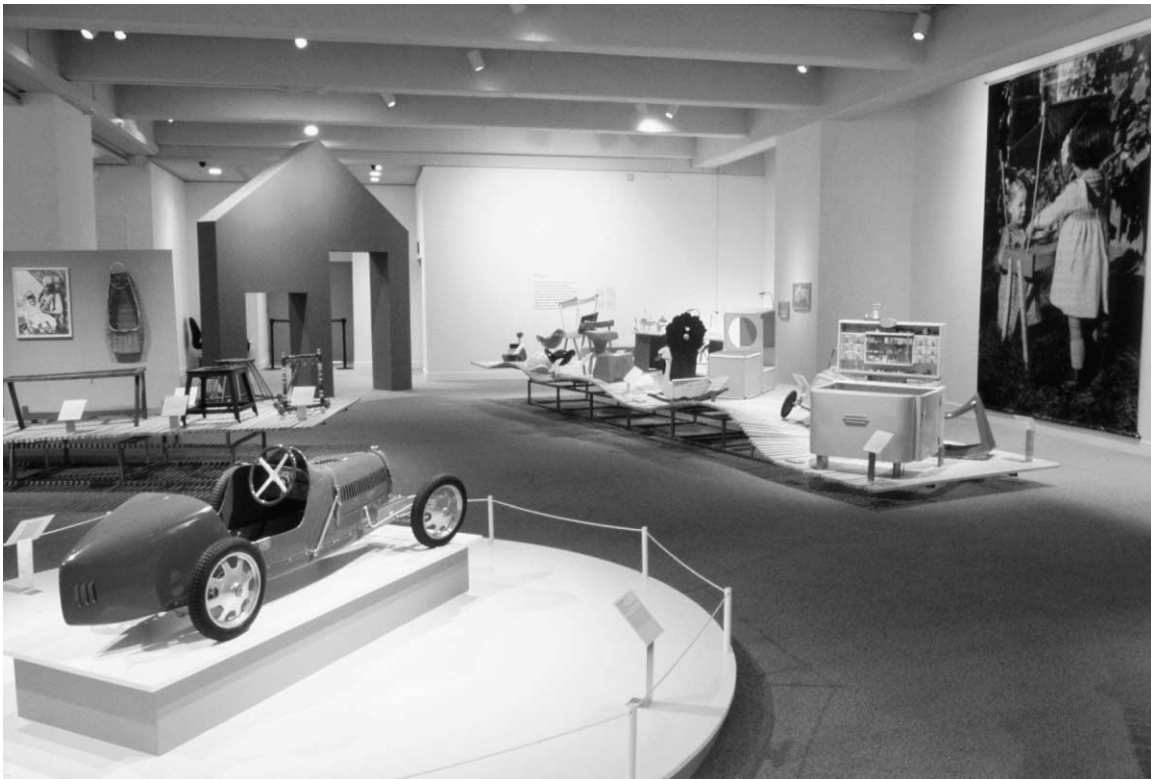


Fig. 2. Installation, *Kid Size: The Material World of Childhood*, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Conn. (Courtesy of Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art.)

these works confirm that the field is emerging from the long shadow cast by Philippe Ariès's classic 1960 work, *Centuries of Childhood*.¹ Rather than debating the moment when “our” notion of childhood as a warm, happy, and carefree time first emerged (a Eurocentric pursuit, if ever there was one), historians are now offering a more sustained consideration of the ways in which a child’s social location—culture, class, gender, religion, age—affect the experience of being young. Studies of material culture are an important part of this trend, evidenced by “Designing Modern Childhoods,” an international interdisciplinary conference held at the University of California at Berkeley in 2002, and the resulting volume of essays currently under contract with Rutgers University Press.

Yet, these exhibitions also seem to speak to a set of cultural anxieties that are (to a certain extent) independent of scholarly trends. Indeed, while scholars focus on childhood as a cultural construct inexorably linked to the attitudes and actions of adults, the exhibitions tend to emphasize childhood

as a special realm to which adults can only gain entrée by visiting the museum.

This trend is particularly pronounced at *Kid Size*, where most of the objects are displayed on undulating platforms provided by Vitra’s exhibition designers. Remarkably effective at providing ready visual access to objects that vary dramatically in size, they nonetheless break with display conventions associated with the adult world of the museum, substituting instead something akin to the magic carpets on which youthful imagination is understood to take flight. Wadsworth designers Cecil Adams and Mark Giuliano reinforced that tone by devising entry portals and room dividers using primary colors and simple geometrical forms—the dominant visual codes of childhood in the modern world (fig. 2). Overscaled, these elements were intended to remind adults of what it feels like to be small. Likewise, the Wadsworth Atheneum staff created “baseball” cards to guide children through the exhibition, involving young visitors in a performance of childness that becomes part of the display. The implications of the installation design were not lost on journalists. Indeed, *The New York Times Home Design Magazine* described the exhibition as “as thick and rich as an ice-cream

¹ Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Vintage Books, 1962).

sundae,” while the *Hartford Courant* ran a review under the headline “Age of Innocence.”²

How are we to understand these invitations to experience the world through the eyes of a child (to paraphrase the McCord Museum’s tagline for *Growing Up in Montreal*)? Are they simply attempts to harness nostalgia in the name of enhancing museum visitation rates? Or could they be a response to more profound concerns that childhood itself may be on the brink of extinction? After all, it is not just that prepubescent children are aping adult behaviors but that puberty itself is arriving earlier than ever before (at least in Europe and the United States). Might the appeal of exhibitions on the material culture of childhood rest in their reassurance that childhood itself still exists? If so, how readily does that comforting message fit with the scholarship upon which such exhibitions are based? It is this last question that came to mind as I visited *Kid Size* in Hartford.

First, a disclaimer. Organized by the preeminent museum of modern furniture design, *Kid Size* is primarily an exhibition of furniture. Despite its subtitle, it does not attempt to present a comprehensive treatment of childhood’s material manifestations. Clothes, dolls, games, books, eating utensils, playground equipment, and architectural settings designed specifically for use by children—these are nowhere to be found. As a result, the story is not as rich as it might have been, foreclosing intriguing possibilities for reading the material expression of gender that clothes might have provided and making it impossible to investigate how culturally constructed notions of childhood have been expressed in different media.

Not that *Kid Size* pushes any interpretation very far. According to Thomas Denenberg, Richard Koopman Curator of American Decorative Arts at the Wadsworth Atheneum, the exhibition’s organizers supplied labels that addressed primarily formal issues. Expanding upon those texts, Denenberg and Assistant Curator Trina Bowman introduced wall panels in which they stated the general themes for the exhibition (to wit, that “Furniture and playthings—the stuff of childhood—communicate explicit messages about adult attitudes, expectations, and desires for their offspring”) and its six major sections (sleep, basic functions, play, mobility, formal learning, and seating). They also in-

troduced expanded labels to provide more specific information about the construction and function of each object. Short of recurating the exhibition, however, they could not undo the fact that the installation was organized to emphasize childhood universals; the section on mobility, for instance, is meant to demonstrate that designs encouraging “thrilling but safe exploration of the environment can be found around the world.” Evidently, the organizers count on viewers to delve into the dense catalogue essays for the culturally and historically specific information required to understand “adult attitudes, expectations, and desires” that the featured objects are intended to convey. As a result, the interpretation available in the gallery is sparse indeed.

Nonetheless, the breadth and depth of furniture presented in *Kid Size* are breathtaking. The exhibition is strongest in European furniture from the 1880s to the present, reflecting not only the strengths of the Vitra collection but also the historical fact that English and American Victorians and their European counterparts generated an unprecedented amount of material “stuff” to reinforce and celebrate their view of children as naturally innocent, even angelic. Just a quick scan of the gallery confirms that modern designers continued the trend, inventing a new visual code of childhood, one that depended on primary colors and simple geometric forms. This code remains largely in force (including in the design of the Wadsworth Atheneum installation itself), although by the late twentieth century, designers began to emphasize flexible pieces able to take on other functions as a child grows and develops new skills and interests.

The important role of furniture in framing culturally constructed views of childhood is particularly clear in Victorian contributions to the material world of childhood, chief among them the elevated crib, the high chair with integral food tray, and the baby carriage (or pram). Well represented in *Kid Size*, the three share several characteristics. They each served to elevate the child, making it visible and marking its symbolic importance. All three provided a mechanism for bringing the child into the adult world while foreclosing any possibility that the child would disrupt that well-ordered realm. By keeping the infant’s more demonic tendencies at bay, these objects became essential for seeing the child as inherently angelic. Finally, they all allowed adults to interact with their beloved children while keeping physical contact to a minimum—something that was especially important for parents

² Sandra Ballentine, “Small World,” *New York Times Home Design Magazine*, April 18, 2004, p. 72. Matthew Erikson, “Age of Innocence: Wadsworth Atheneum Exhibition Reduces Childhood to a Few Essential Ingredients,” *Hartford Courant*, March 28, 2004, p. G1.



Fig. 3. John M. Most, carver, Colt family cradle, Hartford, Conn., 1857. Oak and velvet. (Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Conn.; Bequest of Elizabeth Hart Jarvis Colt, 1905-1580.)

engaged in conspicuous leisure for whom children served as important accessories.

The cradle designed in 1857 for the firstborn son of firearms manufacturer Samuel Colt is the best example of this Victorian tendency to put the precious child on display (fig. 3). Standing forty inches tall, it held the Colt heir on high, encased in an intricately carved shell of wood from Connecticut's charter oak tree. Adorned with elaborate symbols of the Colt family (not just the family crest but also eight colt heads and two rampant colt finials), the cradle is, as the label suggests, "a virtual throne . . . for a baby king."

At a formal level, the bentwood cradles produced by Thonet Brothers in the 1880s, with their simple languid lines, seem diametrically opposed to the Colt cradle. Yet, the conception of childhood underlying their design was not so different. Like the Colt cradle, Thonet examples raised the

precious object off the floor, encasing it in a shell-like container with elaborate fittings. An advertising photograph reproduced in the catalogue shows the Thonet cradle number 2 in situ, complete with an elaborate fabric canopy that echoes the nightgown of the sleeping child's doting mother and creates a visual vibration between mother and child without requiring physical contact between them. In short, the Thonet mass-produced cradles made the accoutrements of heir worship available to the middle class.

Famed for their bentwood chairs, Thonet Brothers were prolific manufacturers of children's furniture in the late nineteenth century, producing cribs, high chairs, and student desks as well as child-size versions of their adult chairs. *Kid Size* includes examples of all these products as well as pieces by other well-known designers. Gerrit Rietveld, for instance, designed a range of objects

for children's use. His high chair and a handcart (both from about 1920 and in the de Stijl mode) are on display in Hartford, and a child's cot from about 1930 and a high chair based on his adult Zigzag chair of 1940 are illustrated in the catalogue. Often overlooked in discussions of Rietveld's work, these pieces help confirm his interest in progressive child rearing, a facet of his career that emerged in 1998 from Alice Friedman's close reading of the Truus Schröder house.³

The children's furniture of Charles and Ray Eames is better known. Thus, their small-scale plywood chair of 1945 (with its distinctive heart-shape cutout) and their Hang-It-All clothes hook of 1953 (comprised of wooden balls in bright colors, supported on a white armature of welded steel) will seem like old friends. Less familiar is an ingenious mechanical "horse" they designed in 1944. Made of four metal legs with broad wooden feet that connect via two hinges screwed into a simple wooden seat, this horse looks nothing like the realistic rocking horses of the Victorian era. But unlike those stationary steeds that only simulated a canter, the Eames horse strode forward as the rider's body weight shifted from side to side.

In fact, the Colt cradle and the Rietveld high chair (the latter borrowed from the Carnegie Museum) are two of the thirteen objects that the Wadsworth curatorial staff added to the installation, in part to fill gaps created when objects from the original exhibition were not available. At the same time, they embraced the opportunity to make distinctive contributions to the exhibition's content. Twenty-first-century "hyperinstruments" (digital music devices designed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Lab) acknowledge the extent to which computers have become an important part of the material world of childhood. A 1928 child-size battery-powered Bugatti (exquisitely wrought by the same craftsmen who fabricated full-size roadsters for adult clients) helps underline the exhibition's heavy reliance on objects created for social and economic elites.

In order to help a local audience make a more direct connection to the exhibition's themes, the Wadsworth Atheneum staff included a wide range of American objects, some of them drawn from the museum's Wallace Nutting Collection, the largest collection of early colonial American furniture, iron, and domestic arts in the United States. In

addition to the Colt cradle, these materials included a low rocking cradle from seventeenth-century New England; an eighteenth-century high chair; a child's commode from about 1830; a Shaker chair from about 1875; a 1930s high chair designed by Warren McArthur (resplendent in aluminum tubing joined with compression fittings, it was borrowed from the Baltimore Museum of Art); an electric scooter designed by Sharper Image in 2000; and two Sting-Ray bicycles from 1969–70. These last objects, complete with banana seats, are most likely to trigger a nostalgic response from American viewers.

As impressive as this array of European and American furniture undoubtedly is, what sets *Kid Size* apart is its refusal to focus exclusively on the West. According to Lucy Bullivant, Vitra's guest curator, the goal of the project was nothing less than "to explore and critically illuminate the changing relationship between adults and children as expressed in their immediate, everyday material environments in societies in and beyond the Western world" (p. 13). In this sense, the use of the term *world* in the subtitle is merited. Indeed, the exhibition includes sleeping mats and a modern cradle from Africa; a brightly colored wooden cradle from India; a play table and bathtub from China; baby carriers from Indonesia; hooks and food baskets from Papua New Guinea; a bamboo cradle from the Philippines; a hammock from Brazil; slings (for transporting children) from Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, and Paraguay; and a Cheyenne cradleboard and a cradle made by Native Americans living on the northwest coast of the United States.

This willingness to treat such diverse objects as comparable and to acknowledge that they are equally worthy of the viewer's consideration is refreshing indeed, as is the organizational structure that seeks to facilitate cross-cultural conversations between objects produced in dramatically different contexts. Focusing on broad categories of human activities, each of which is arguably universal and which together roughly follow the stages of child development in any culture, the exhibition is organized around six thematic sections: sleep, basic functions (that is, eating, bathing, grooming, toilet training), play, mobility (both caregivers' methods for transporting children and the objects children use to propel themselves), formal learning, and seating.

Despite these efforts, however, the organizers continue to see the world as divided into two parts, the West and the rest. This attitude is particularly

³ Alice T. Friedman, *Women and the Making of the Modern House: A Social and Architectural History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998), chap. 2.



Fig. 4. Mat, Aibom, New Guinea, modern. Plant fiber. Sleeping mat, Timbuke, central Sepick, Papua New Guinea, modern. Bamboo fiber. (Museum der Kulturen, Basel.)

clear in the exhibition checklist (published in the catalogue), which provides dates for each of the European and Euro-American artifacts, even if only to identify the century in which it was made. In contrast, materials from Africa, Asia, Indonesia, India, and South America are not given dates; this is true even when the curators clearly know when an object was made, as in the case of a hook from New Guinea identified as the work of a fourteen-year-old boy named Kumbal. Divorced from their historical contexts, these objects are rendered timeless. Seemingly isolated from the forces of modernity—or any other social dynamic—they are transformed into static tokens of perpetually primitive cultures. The Wadsworth Atheneum curatorial staff is to be commended for determining dates for every piece in the exhibition and including that information on the labels. But even their attention to this important detail could not undo the fact that the exhibition uses so-called non-Western materials as exotic “Others” that re-center the viewer’s attention on the number and variety of objects used by European and American children.

That is not to say that objects from “beyond” the Western world are denigrated—far from it. In fact, the most numerous non-Western objects in the exhibition are sleeping mats from Africa and Peru and slings used throughout South America to strap babies to their mothers (fig. 4). As the label text makes explicit, these objects enhance physical closeness between infants and their parents—something that modern psychologists have come

to see as essential for the child’s sense of emotional security. Yet, these objects are treated almost interchangeably and communicate relatively little about their respective cultures. Instead, they serve to highlight the Western tendency—particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—to use furniture to mediate the physical interaction between children and their caregivers.

If the exhibition falls somewhat short of its ambitious aims, the catalogue goes a long way toward realizing the goals articulated by Bullivant. In addition to the curator’s statement of purpose and a fully illustrated checklist, the volume includes twenty substantive essays that consider the material expression of attitudes toward childhood in many different cultural contexts and from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives. Much more than a reminder of the exhibition experience, it offers its own substantial contributions to our understanding of the relationship between children’s furniture and attitudes toward childhood.

The book itself was designed with care. Its almost five hundred illustrations (many in color) present a rich mix of paintings, period photographs, and contemporary images that put the material culture of childhood in its social, historical, and physical context. Each page contains a thumbnail image of a child’s head (a detail from an image for that particular essay) to facilitate the reader’s navigation of this massive tome. One design flaw was the decision not to use any of the conventional means for marking the start of a new paragraph; with the

transition indicated only by the white space left at the end of the last line of the preceding paragraph, the text caused unnecessary eyestrain.

The catalogue's twenty essays can be grouped loosely into four thematic sections. Overtly historical in approach and focused explicitly on the European context, the first group tends to highlight the extent to which modern notions of childhood innocence can make it difficult to interpret children's furniture of the seventeenth century. The cradle and the baby walker were not simply a means of protecting infants from the physical dangers of their surroundings. According to Noreen Marshall's essay, "The Big Sleep," the cradle was also understood to be a site where the child was particularly vulnerable to supernatural forces; fairies were most like to snatch human babies from their unwatched cradles, leaving changelings in their place (a legend that, Marshall posits, was used to explain the birth of a child with Down's syndrome or other disability). Likewise, Sally Kevill-Davies's essay, "The Wide World," makes it clear that wheeled baby walkers were intended to counteract the animalistic tendencies inherent in "untamed beasts"—preventing infants from crawling like animals and encouraging them to walk within their first twelve months (p. 51). Walking frames may have protected toddlers from painful falls, but they did nothing to protect mobile infants from rolling into the domestic fire.

Another essay in this group is "Die Kindersraube, 1991," a cultural history of the children's room. In the hands of a less-skilled historian, this essay might have been a discussion of the visual tropes of childhood found in nursery furnishings and furniture. But Ingeborg Weber-Kellermann recognizes the establishment of such "play paradises" as just one of the cultural practices that members of an emerging middle class used to distinguish themselves from the urban poor (p. 30). Thus, Weber-Kellermann also looks closely at the memoirs of working-class children to flesh out their experience of living in cramped rooms. Often hungry, these children knew hard work from their earliest years.

The next four essays address children's perceptions of the world around them, arguing for fundamental cognitive differences between children and adults. Although the authors tend to agree on the importance of play as children's primary mode of accumulating experiences that help them build cognitive skills, they differ somewhat in the implications of that observation for child-centered design. Following Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes, architect and anthropologist Franco La Cecla deplores the modern reliance on

manufactured toys and their tendency to facilitate "the imposition upon childhood of preconstituted meanings" (p. 71). Cultural critic Renato Pedio likewise values what he calls "sovereign play" (in which children invent their own rules) and contrasts this mode of play with games in which children learn rules accepted by the outside world (p. 83). Rather than dismissing manufactured toys, however, he challenges designers of educational games to preserve within them a degree of sovereign play. Günter Beltzig, himself a designer of playgrounds and playground equipment, also questions modernist attempts to stimulate the child's imagination with abstract forms, which, he argues, work instead to "rob the child of the freedom to interpret its environment on its own terms" (p. 92).

Written by anthropologists, the six essays in the third group focus, respectively, on attitudes towards childhood in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and contemporary South America, in sub-Saharan Africa, in the People's Republic of China, among the Iatmul of Papua New Guinea, among the peasants of northern India, and in Filipino villages. Although these essays offer much-needed cultural context for artifacts in the exhibition, it is clear that the scholars themselves are somewhat flummoxed by their inclusion in a project focused on children's furniture. Florence Weiss, for instance, titles her essay on the Iatmul "People, Not Furniture," while Gerhard Kubik argues that "European children's furniture cannot be compared in any way to objects produced in Africa." Furthermore, he warns that the very term *children's furniture* can be "deceptive when used in cultural comparisons" (p. 112).

All these scholars note the lack of children's furniture in the cultures they study, but they differ on why that is so. In her essay on the People's Republic of China, Tina Wodiunig relates children's furniture to a European emphasis on individualism; in China, the concept of the "relational self" (in which the "individual always perceives and defines himself or herself in relation to other people" [p. 120]) made children's furniture unthinkable. (J. S. Bhandari makes a similar argument about children raised in joint families among the peasantry of north India.) Interestingly, the collective child rearing instituted after the Revolution continues to de-emphasize individualism, although Chinese institutions devoted to child care do use child-size furniture. Among the Iatmul, Weiss argues, there is no children's furniture because children and adults are equal. She sees furniture primarily as an attempt to control children's movements and

(she implies) to control their minds as well. In a culture in which adults believe that children will learn everything they need to know on their own initiative, children's furniture simply performs no social function.

The last group of essays focuses on twentieth-century designs for children's use, touching on early twentieth-century Montessori schools; Giuseppe Terragni's Asilo Sant'Elia nursery school in Como (built in the mid-1930s); the impact of the galley kitchen on children's access to active play; the evolution of Swedish design from the 1920s to the 1990s; Herman Hertzberger's Apollo Schools in Amsterdam from the 1980s; IKEA's impact on children's use of domestic space (particularly since 1990); Japanese Tamagotchi; and contemporary playgrounds. Although none of these essays directly addresses the issue, collectively they suggest that modernism has had a special relationship to childhood. Not only were modernist designers (like Terragni) particularly eager to rethink the architectural forms of the institutions most closely associated with childhood (especially middle-class houses, schools, and kindergartens), but they also championed a formal language of primary colors and simple geometric forms that has become closely associated with childhood. Perhaps modernists wanted to see themselves as childlike—adults who were nonetheless capable of fulfilling Maria Montessori's claim about children, who, she said, "make us experience a humanity that is better than ours, a humanity full of innocent vitality, strength, and beauty" (p. 181).

If the catalogue ends with a somewhat utopian notion of childhood, it also highlights the gaps in the exhibition proper. Thanks to the inclusion of two Biocars designed to challenge disabled children to play more actively, there is at least an acknowledgement that not all children share the same physical abilities. Yet, the balance of the exhibition maintains the illusion that childhood is an inherently happy, healthy time, untouched by poverty, disease, or death. Labor is not a part of this scene. The focus is also firmly on early childhood, neatly avoiding the traumas that often accompany the transition to adulthood.

This remarkably cheery version of childhood is reinforced by the installation itself. Vitra's undulat-

ing platforms may break certain conventions of museum display, but they continue to isolate each piece, treating it primarily as an aesthetic object while sometimes ignoring how it would have actually been used. A case in point is the steel and maple school desk designed by French architect Jean Prouvé in 1949. Presented on its own—the better to highlight its dynamic lines and ingenious use of just four legs to support two chairs and a double desk—it utterly fails to communicate the way that rows of such desks would reinforce school-room regimentation modeled directly on the factory environment. Nor does it address the use of such desks in colonial contexts, as objects that trained African bodies to adopt French postures.

Perhaps that is expecting too much from a furniture exhibition. After all, many of the displayed objects are consumer goods designed to perpetuate the illusion that an individual's problems can be solved through the act of consumption. Perhaps these objects and their necessarily cryptic labels simply do not lend themselves to communicating the types of critical perspectives that historians can proffer in their dense texts. Yet, including the original sale price of each object, along with an idea of the income that a worker earned at the same time and place, would go a long way toward helping visitors think about who could afford these goods and who could not. Or what about including the more affordable goods available at Wal-Mart or Toys R Us? (Even such a suggestion highlights the extent to which modernist aesthetics—with their reliance on such Ruskinian notions as truth to materials—helped determine which objects deserved a place in *Kid Size*.) Displaying such goods upside down (so that visitors can see the manufacturer's label identifying where each object was produced) would be a first step in understanding the global systems at play in "the material world of childhood." Identify the age range of the workers who assemble goods in those distant factories, and visitors might be able to see the color and geographic location of those who forgo an idyllic childhood so that children in the United States and western Europe can enjoy the material trappings of one. In the end, we might remember that children may be everywhere, but a carefree childhood is not.

