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Jeroen J.H. Dekker

# Story Telling through Fine Art: Public Histories of Childhood and Education in Exhibitions in the Netherlands and Belgium C. 1980 – C. 2020

**Abstract:** Since the 1980s in art exhibitions in the Netherlands and Belgium, public stories were told on the history of childhood and education. They have a large timespan with objects and stories from the Middle Ages until c. 2000. This chapter investigates the relationship between the exhibited art and the exhibition's educational messages. The exhibitions told a story about children and education in the past by showing fine art and sometimes also other objects. Two exhibitions at the start and at the end of the sample based the exhibition design on the view of children as miniature adults. The other exhibitions assume more continuity. They become more didactic in the course of the years with various didactical activities for both children and educators. Past and present were connected in various ways: by taking a timespan until the present, by connecting the seventeenth century with the present, by a complementary didactic program, and by embedding the exhibition in a broader project with Radio and TV broadcasts. All exhibitions show boys and girls of various ages, but differing in social diversity. Two of them focus on a specific social group, respectively the marginal and the upper classes, while the others tell a story of social variety notwithstanding the fact that before the nineteenth century most paintings of children were commissioned by the well-to-do. The relationship between art and reality is differently interpreted. *The Child in Our Art* and *Being Young* tell stories about miniature adults. *Pride and Joy*, while focusing on well-to-do children often seemingly dressed as miniature adults, interprets the portraits as images of children with their own world and stage of development. The exhibitions confirm Frank Simon's view on the role of artists and historians: they should work together to bring us inside the history of childhood and education.

**Keywords:** story-telling, fine art, exhibitions on history of childhood and education, Europe 1500–2000, cultural history of childhood and education

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## Introduction

In a personal story about educational realities, the historian of education Frank Simon tells that “[h]istory for me is also about literature and visiting exhibitions.”<sup>1</sup> The examples of exhibitions he mentions are, however, not about history of education but about modern, mostly abstract art that could stimulate you to reflect about non-abstract historical issues in a sense that “then you think: this artist brings us more inside history than a historian can do.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, he concludes, if we as historians should do that successfully “we would not be historians anymore.”<sup>3</sup> In the last decades and inspired by Philippe Ariès’ innovative study, the visual became important for the history of education.<sup>4</sup> In this contribution about exhibitions on childhood and education in the past in Belgium and the Netherlands from the 1980s until the present, we will compare ways of how bringing together art and history resulted in public stories about childhood and education in the past.<sup>5</sup>

The exhibitions will be comparatively analysed? along, apart from information about the period covered, the people behind the exhibition, and the accompanying catalogue, four topics: the story told, the relation between past

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1 Sjaak Braster and María del Mar del Pozo Andrés, “Frank Simon: A personal story about everyday educational realities,” *Historia y Memoria de la Educación* 8 (2018), 766.

2 Braster and Del Pozo, “Frank Simon,” 767.

3 Ibid.

4 Philippe Ariès, *L’Enfant et la vie familiale sous l’Ancien Régime* (Paris, Librairie Plon, 1960). Also see: Jeroen J.H. Dekker and Leendert F. Groenendijk, “Philippe Ariès’s Discovery of Childhood after Fifty Years: The Impact of a Classic Study on Educational Research,” *Oxford Review of Education* 38, no. 2 (2012), 133–147; Marc Depaepe and Bregt Henkens, in co-operation with James C. Albisetti, Jeroen J.H. Dekker, Mark D’hoker, Frank Simon, and Jo Tollebeek, eds., *The Challenge of the Visual in the History of Education* (Gent: C.S.H.P., 2000); Jeroen J.H. Dekker, “The Restrained Child. Imaging the Regulation of Children’s Behaviour and Emotions in Early Modern Europe: The Dutch Golden Age”, in *Images of the European Child*, eds. María del Mar del Pozo Andrés and Bernat Sureda García, 17–39. Special Issue, *History of Education and Children’s Literature* 13 (2018); Ulrike Mietzner, Kevin Myers, and Nick Peim, *Visual History. Images of Education* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005); Jeroen J.H. Dekker, ed., *A Cultural History of Education in the Renaissance. Volume 3. A Cultural History of Education* (London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020); Francis Haskell, *History and its Images. Art and the Interpretation of the Past* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993).

5 See Susan Legêne, “Pleidooi voor historische tentoonstellingskritiek,” *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 121, 4 (2008): 462 on exhibitions. Exhibitions on the child in history were organized from the early 1900s. See Paul Vandenbroek, “Aspekten van de kinderikonografie in de oude Nederlanden (voornamelijk 16<sup>e</sup>-17<sup>e</sup> eeuw),” in *Het kind in onze kunst van 1800 tot heden*, eds. Luk de Vos, Joris Duytschaever, Eliane Gubin, Marc Holthof, Paul Pelckmans, and Paul Vandenbroek (Brussel: R. Coolen, 1983), 61.

and present, diversity in regard to age, class, sex, and city / country of the people represented, and art and educational reality.<sup>6</sup> First, the creation of our sample of exhibitions will be discussed, followed by an analysis of each exhibition and a conclusion about continuity and change of art exhibitions about education in the past in the Netherlands and Flanders in the last forty years.

## The Creation of the Sample

The main criterion for selecting exhibitions was that story telling happened significantly, mainly using fine art, and further the experience of the author who visited the exhibition and viewed the fine art. The first criterion excluded important Dutch and Belgian exhibitions on the history of childhood and education about children at risk and schooling. Among them are the Belgian exhibition *The Child in the Residential Institution* in Leuven (1986), a precursor in cultural-pedagogical exhibitions on children at risk,<sup>7</sup> and numerous exhibitions of the Belgian School Museum in Flemish Yper (also see the chapter of Depaep in this volume) and the Dutch National Museum of Education, since 2012 in Dordrecht and before in Rotterdam. The role of public histories of the school deserves and gets specific attention elsewhere in this volume.

Applying the two criteria resulted in a sample of six exhibitions: *The Child in Our Art from 1800 until the Present* in Brussels (1983–1984), *Orphans and Children at risk. Children's Homes in Retrospect* in Arnhem (1997), *Children of All Times: Children's Culture in the Netherlands From the Middle Ages Until Nowadays* in Den Bosch (1997), *Pride and Joy. Children's Portraits in the Netherlands 1500–1700* in Haarlem and Antwerp (2000), *The Art of Education* in Dordrecht (2013), and

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<sup>6</sup> See Jeroen J.H. Dekker, "Images as Representations. Visual Sources on Education and Childhood in the Past," in *Educational Historiography, (Re)Presentations, Realities, Materialities*, eds. Jeroen J.H. Dekker and Paul Smeijers, Special Issue, *Paedagogica Historica* 51, no. 6 (2015): 706–709 on reality and the theory of representation; Jeroen J.H. Dekker, "Looking at Filtered Realities. Images of Childhood and Parenting in the Dutch Golden Age", in: *Pädagogische Reflexionen des Visuellen*, ed. Kerstin te Heesen (Münster, New York: Waxmann-Verlag, 2014), 30–33.

<sup>7</sup> See *The Child in the Residential Institution. One hundred fifty years of care for children with psychosocial problems* Leuven (April 15 –May 16, 1986), organized by Katholieke Universiteit Leuven with KADOC (Katholiek Documentatie- en Onderzoekscentrum). See catalogue: Mark D'Hoker, Marleen Flaba, Walter Hellinckx, and Ilse Mortelmans, *Het kind in de inrichting. 150 jaar residentiële zorg voor kinderen met psychosociale problemen. Catalogus van de tentoonstelling 25 april – 16 mei 1986* (Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Afdelingen Historische pedagogiek and Orthopedagogiek, 1986).

*Being Young in the Nineteenth century: The Child in Dutch Nineteenth Century Art* in Haarlem (2019–2020). In three exhibitions the author was not only involved as a visitor, resulting in an inside but possibly also biased view: in *Orphans and Children at risk* and in *The Art of Education*, he was involved in the exhibition's design and the accompanying book, and for the catalogue of *Pride and Joy*, he co-authored a chapter. The description and analysis of the six exhibitions below is in a chronological order and along the four topics mentioned.

## Fine Art Exhibitions on Child and Education in the Past, c. 1980 – c. 2020

In 1983–1984, the exhibition *The Child in Our Art from 1800 until the Present* took place in Brussels at *Galerij ASLK*, a building of the General Saving and Pension Fund.<sup>8</sup> ASLK was not only hosting the exhibition, but was also its initiator and sponsor, with as general coordinator its Head of Cultural Affairs Bob Coolen. ASLK organized the exhibition “at this very moment [. . .] because it went together with a number of promotional activities organized by the Saving Fund for the benefit of its youthful current and potential customers.”<sup>9</sup> The exhibition with one hundred twenty-one pieces of fine art, mainly paintings, was accompanied by a catalogue book with a description of all pieces of art displayed and six chapters on the artistic representation of the child in the past and its social-economic context.<sup>10</sup>

The story told is formulated as first to mirror through the exhibition the consecutive art history stages<sup>11</sup> in Southern-Netherlandish art by chronologically showing pieces of art on childhood, and second to show a variety of views on childhood, from lovely and happy childhood scenes to children in miserable

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**8** ASLK (Algemene Spaar- en Lijfrentekas), later ending as an independent institution by merging with other financial institutions, was founded in 1865 to stimulate saving by the common man.

**9** Bob Coolen “Woord vooraf,” in *Het kind in onze kunst van 1800 tot heden*, eds. Luk de Vos, Joris Duytschaever, Eliane Gubin, Marc Holthof, Paul Pelckmans, and Paul Vandenbroek (Brussels: R. Coolen, 1983), 7.

**10** Luk De Vos, et al., *Het kind in onze kunst van 1800 tot heden* (Brussels: R. Coolen, 1983).

**11** Neo-classicism, romanticism, realism, impressionism, naturalism, symbolism, expressionism, animism, surrealism, and the styles after the Second World War: Jean F. Buyck, “Ter verantwoording,” in *Het kind in onze kunst van 1800 tot heden*, eds. Luk de Vos, Joris Duytschaever, Eliane Gubin, Marc Holthof, Paul Pelckmans, and Paul Vandenbroek (Brussel: R. Coolen, 1983), 12.

conditions.<sup>12</sup> The period 1800–present was justified by the idea that from then a separate children’s world was born: “In that period the process started of social and sociological distancing between adult and child,” stimulated by authors such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and becoming considerable only far in the twentieth century. The art exhibited shows the artist’s view on this nascent separate world and how “society did feel (rather late) the psychology of the child,” a feeling absent in early modern Europe, where the “child was simply an adult in miniature who, after a brief initiation, could fully function in the adult world.”<sup>13</sup> Attention for children did not start before the eighteenth century and “before 1914 there was no idea of childhood as a clear concept” with childhood “no stage of life with specific protection or attention” and with children “closely involved in the adult’s world.”<sup>14</sup> For the rest, Paul Vandenbroeck in his chapter on iconography in the early modern Southern Netherlands is more cautious about this image of childhood fully relating to modernity, taking a moderate position in the classic debate around Ariès’ study.<sup>15</sup>

The art displayed shows children, both girls and boys, in all ages until c. fourteen, mostly in an urban environment and suggesting in particular for nineteenth century art a sharp dichotomy between happy childhood of the well-to-do and miserable childhood of the poor. Art in this exhibition is both “an image of falsehood” and “the raw reality” in naturalistic depictions of “the loneliness, the dissatisfaction, and the hereditary predestination of the child from the proletariat.”<sup>16</sup> In a brief explanation of the selection of paintings art historian Buyck critically describes the “veiled sentimentality and trivializing anecdotic style” in the nineteenth century in genre painting as the falsification of reality and with agreement concludes that twentieth century surrealism does attack the myth of children’s innocence with “parodying and provocative strategies.”<sup>17</sup>

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**12** Coolen, “Woord vooraf”, 7.

**13** *Ibid.*, 8–9.

**14** Eliane Gubin, “De social-economische betekenis van het kind en het gezin in de XIXe en XXe eeuw,” in *Het kind in onze kunst van 1800 tot heden*, eds. Luk de Vos, Joris Duytschaever, Eliane Gubin, Marc Holthof, Paul Pelckmans, and Paul Vandenbroek (Brussel: R. Coolen, 1983), 65.

**15** Vandenbroeck, “Aspekten”, 18–20. See Jeroen J.H. Dekker, and Leendert F. Groenendijk, “Philippe Ariès’s Discovery of Childhood after Fifty Years: The Impact of a Classic Study on Educational Research,” *Oxford Review of Education* 38, no. 2 (2012), 133–147; Jeroen J.H. Dekker, Bernard Kruithof, Frank Simon, and Bruno Vanobbergen, “Discoveries of Childhood in History: an Introduction,” *Paedagogica Historica* 48, no. 1 (2012), 1–9; Willem Frijhoff, “Historian’s Discovery of Childhood,” *Paedagogica Historica* 48, no. 1 (2012), 11–29.

**16** Coolen, “Woord vooraf”, 8.

**17** Buyck, “Ter verantwoording”, 14.

Buyck describes part of the nineteenth century art on the exhibition as “sluggish scenes of children’s virtues and vices” with “neglecting the reality of child labor” and he attacks the paternalistic attitude towards poverty or the “prevailing sentimentalism” when artists picture physically disabled children, for example the blind child.<sup>18</sup> Remarkably however, many exhibits do not fit the only moralizing or idealizing and “an adult in miniature” position, but brings us nearer to the reality of the child’s world, as for example an undated portrait by Constantin Meunier (1834–96) of probably the painter’s child.<sup>19</sup> With this major criticism of the nineteenth-century sentimental representation of childhood in mind, the selection of twentieth-century art was applauded. In modern art the “idyllic view is being disturbed” and no does longer show “beautifying appearances.”<sup>20</sup> For the rest, it is no surprise that the art’s suggestion of reality decreases with twentieth century artistic movements such as cubism and surrealism among other examples. This underlines the different evolution of art history and history of childhood and makes clear that for modern and contemporary history, photographs would replace paintings and drawings, although the realistic style never disappeared in modern paintings, as evidenced in this exhibition.<sup>21</sup>

*Children of All Times: Children’s Culture in the Netherlands from the Middle Ages until Nowadays*, was held in 1997 in ’s-Hertogenbosch, Noordbrabants Museum. It was based on fine art and everyday objects with a timespan from the Middle Ages until the present day. The exhibition’s design was developed by Charles de Mooij, conservator of the museum’s historical department, together with a work group including art and cultural historians. The accompanying catalogue contains descriptions of the two hundred sixty-three pieces of art and everyday objects exhibited and articles by the cultural historians Rudolf Dekker, Annemarieke Willemsen, and Gerard Rooijackers on cultural history of childhood, history of children’s material culture, and history of rituals in the life of the South-Netherlandish child. The articles, strongly integrated with the catalogue, show forty-eight images directly referring to images in the catalogue.<sup>22</sup>

**18** Buyck, “Ter verantwoording”, 13. See: De Vos et al., “Catalogus”, 101.

**19** Luk De Vos et al., “Catalogus en bibliografische notities,” in *Het kind in onze kunst van 1800 tot heden*, eds. Luk de Vos, Joris Duytschaever, Eliane Gubin, Marc Holthof, Paul Pelckmans, and Paul Vandenbroek (Brussel: R. Coolen, 1983), 112, no. 21, *Child portrait*, private collection. Other realistic portraits are nos. 8, 13, 29, 31, 33, and 36.

**20** Buyck, “Ter verantwoording”, 15. See Vandenbroeck, “Aspekten”, 23–24.

**21** See De Vos et al., “Catalogus”, nos. 59, 63, 87, and 99.

**22** Charles de Mooij and Barbara Kruijsen, eds., *Kinderen van alle tijden: Kindercultuur in de Nederlanden vanaf de middeleeuwen tot heden* (Zwolle: Waanders; ’s-Hertogenbosch: Noordbrabants Museum, 1997).

The design of the exhibition intends to tell a child-oriented *Vom Kinde Aus* story by showing the visual legacy of a large number of generations of children that consists of objects such as clothes, toys, furniture, and of the child world's iconography. To that end when looking and reading you could almost imagine being a child in the past.<sup>23</sup> The exhibition's order meticulously follows the child's development stages and the life events from the Middle Ages until the present: from birth to the first steps, from baptism to food, from family to orphanages, from sickness to death, and from playing to school. Fine art is used not as part of art history but of cultural history, namely as historical sources just like the everyday objects. The exhibition through its design and lay-out tells in an attractive way a story about the history of Southern Netherlandish childhood. The time span of the exhibition from the Middle Ages to the present almost automatically makes the visitor compare past and present. Concerning the question if and from which time the discovery of the child should have taken place, Rudolf Dekker assumes that history of childhood should be considered as an emancipation history, in particular since the nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup>

Through its concept and design and the selection of everyday objects and fine art according to a series of themes that together picture the child's world over time the exhibition tells a story of social diversity and social inequality, only partly overcome by more schooling and child protection in modern history. A great difference with *The Child in Our Art* is that *Children of All Times* did not have the intention to show how artists represent the child but to let the visitor enter into the child's world in development stages and educational places over time. This happens by looking at everyday objects and objects of fine art and results in a strong reference to real life.

Also *Orphans and Children at risk. Children's Homes in Retrospect*, held in Arnhem in 1997 in *Gemeentemuseum Arnhem*, was based on a mix of fine art and everyday objects from the late Middle Ages until the present. It was an initiative of *Stichting Residentiële Jeugdzorg Heden en Verleden*, a charitable organization aimed at gaining more interest for contemporary Dutch youth care and its historical roots. The exhibition was designed by early modern historian Petra van Boheemen and the book written by the historians Simon Groenveld, Jeroen Dekker, Chris Leonards, Joost Dankers and Jacques Dane and psychologist Thom Willemse.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>24</sup> Rudolf Dekker, "Kinderen in het verleden: Continuïteit en verandering," in *Kinderen van alle tijden. Kindercultuur in de Nederlanden vanaf de middeleeuwen tot heden*, eds. Charles de Mooij and Barbara Kruijssen (Zwolle: Waanders; 's Hertogenbosch: Noordbrabants Museum, 1997), 30.

<sup>25</sup> Simon Groenveld et al., *Wezen en Boeffjes. Zes eeuwen zorg in wees- en kinderhuizen* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1997).



The exhibition, opened by the Secretary of Justice, Elisabeth Schmitz, told the story of at risk children brought up outside their family in Dutch out-of-home institutions. This history started with orphanages in the late Middle Ages in the urbanized part of Europe. From the nineteenth century increasingly also institutions were founded for criminal children, neglected and abandoned children, and after the Second World War for children with behavioral problems, psychological disorders and psychiatric diseases.<sup>26</sup> The story told aimed at stimulating people with experience in out-of-home child-care to think about the historic development of this care to get insight in continuity and change of out-of-home child care by showing the history of its material world and the discourse about out-of-home-care. Much attention was given to the child's out-of-home daily life, and to private and public investments by first churches and local governments, from the nineteenth century increasingly enlightened and evangelically inspired philanthropists, and from c. 1900 the central government with its child protection laws. These institutions also addressed the educational relationship and the change from non-professional and often religious personnel into educationally, psychologically, and sometimes also psychiatrically trained professionals in the twentieth century. The selection of the exhibits depended on their value for the particular history to be told.

Connecting past and present formed the starting point of exhibition and book, aimed at stimulating insight in the long-term development of out-of-home childcare. The vast timespan showed that childcare was considered necessary for child and community from the late Middle Ages and that children were considered as a specific category that needed protection, care and education, also when their family could not provide for them because of the death of parents, inadequate parenting, or children's behavior problems.

The focus on children at risk and on out-of-home institutions meant a focus on the poor and lower classes. It is true that becoming an orphan happened also for the rich, and in Dutch cities there was often a dichotomy between orphanages for the citizens and those for the poor. The majority of orphans in orphanages were, however, poor because orphans from well-to-do families were mostly cared within the family. Moreover, the out-of-home institutions for the non-orphans, such as neglected and criminal children, admitted in great majority children

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**26** Jeroen J.H. Dekker, "Children at Risk in History: A Story of Expansion," *Paedagogica Historica* 45, no. 1–2 (2009), 17–36; Jeroen J.H. Dekker, *The Will to Change the Child: Re-education Homes for Children at Risk in Nineteenth Century Western Europe* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001), 41–140; Jeroen J.H. Dekker, *Educational Ambitions in History. Childhood and Education in an Expanding Educational Space from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), 106–119.

from poor families. This did not change in the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup> The story about out-of-home child and youth care from the late middle ages until the present intended to give insight into the material and educational reality of out-of-home education in the past with art and everyday objects bringing the viewer and reader closer to the historic actors, the children, the caregivers and educators, and the private and public agencies. This was a descriptive story that did not raise a discussion about the pros and cons of out-of-home education and its effectiveness.<sup>28</sup>

*Pride and Joy. Children's Portraits in the Netherlands 1500–1700*, held in Haarlem in *Frans Halsmuseum* and in Antwerp in *Koninklijke Museum voor Schone Kunsten* in 2000–2001 brings us in another world. While *Orphans and Children at risk* confront us with children's problems and, apart from pride of the boards of the institution a lot of trouble and misery, *Pride and Joy* is about success, pride, wealth, and happiness. It was exclusively based on fine art, eighty-five beautiful children's portraits, all reproduced in the catalogue in full-plate color plates and put into context by articles on the scope for education, on toys and plays, and on children's costume in the late Renaissance and Baroque period.<sup>29</sup> The exhibition, a sequel to the exhibition *Portretten van Echt en Trouw* (1986) about marriage and the family in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, focused on children.<sup>30</sup> Organized by the two museums and a farewell gift for the outgoing director of *Frans Halsmuseum* Derk Snoep, the exhibition was designed by art historians Jan Baptist Bedaux, Rudi Ekkart, and Katlijne Van der Stighelen.

The story about parents' pride of joyful children was told by showing beautiful art and this was possible because of the level of the portrayal of children, then extremely popular in the Northern and Southern Netherlands. The "key role the

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<sup>27</sup> See Groenveld et al., *Wezen en Boefjes*, 9–10.

<sup>28</sup> See Marieke Dekker, "Effectiviteit aan de horizon. Een studie rond onderzoek naar resultaat op het gebied van de justitiële kindbescherming in Nederland tussen 1945 en 2005," (PhD diss., University of Groningen, 2016).

<sup>29</sup> Jan Baptist Bedaux, and Rudi Ekkart, eds., *Pride and Joy. Children's Portraits in the Netherlands 1500–1700* (Ghent/ Amsterdam/ New York: Ludion and Abrams, 2000); Jeroen J.H. Dekker, Leendert F. Groenendijk, and Johan Verberckmoes, "Proudly raising vulnerable youngsters. The scope for education in the Netherlands," in *Pride and Joy. Children's Portraits in the Netherlands 1500–1700*, eds. Jan Baptist Bedaux, and Rudi Ekkart (Ghent, Amsterdam, New York: Ludion and Abrams, 2000), 43–60.

<sup>30</sup> Derk P. Snoep, and Paul Huvenne, "Foreword" in *Pride and Joy. Children's Portraits in the Netherlands 1500–1700*, eds. Jan Baptist Bedaux, and Rudi Ekkart (Ghent, Amsterdam, New York: Ludion and Abrams, 2000), 6; Eddy de Jongh, *Portretten van echt en trouw. Huwelijk en gezin in de Nederlandse kunst van de zeventiende eeuw* (Zwolle: Waanders, 1986).

Dutch Republic and Flanders played in the development of children's portraiture" was an important reason to bring those painting traditions together. That "[q]uality was an important and often decisive factor in the selection process" emphasizes the intention to let experience the visitors with sometimes stunning beauty.<sup>31</sup> But bringing the visitors and readers in aesthetic delight was not the whole story. That was, as the striking title shows, about parental pride and the children's joy. It was also about parental pride evident from the children dressed at its best, expressed by the Dutch title of the exhibition, *Kinderen op hun mooist*, and important within the upper classes that commissioned painters to portray their children. Joy demonstrates that parents prefer their children to be joyful, a message made clear from the catalogue blurb to foreword, preface, introduction and the various chapters. This intended story determined the selection of paintings made on initiative of parents or painter-parents "in which the primary intention was to record the features of a specific child." As a consequence genre paintings, earlier dominating *Portretten van Echt en Trouw*, were excluded entirely.<sup>32</sup>

With its focus on early modern Europe there was no strong relationship with the present. The exhibition intended to give insight into parents' and family's pride of their children in the past, which resulted in them being portrayed by excellent artists. But the portraits, selected for an age-span until circa fourteen, do more than show pride. The message of the catalogue essays is that childhood was also in those times a specific stage of life, notwithstanding the seemingly adult clothing and the physical posture when posing. At first sight this posture looks like a miniature adult, but when observed closely it turns out as a child holding a posture, ready to start playing as soon as possible after posing.<sup>33</sup> A beautiful example is the portrait of Susanna De Vos, daughter of Cornelis De Vos (1584/85–1651), the famous South-Netherlandish painter. Susanna is dressed as an adult, but no less a child than a child of the present (Figure 1).

In contrast with *Orphans and Children at risk* the design and its selection of exhibits inevitably lead to the upper-class, the rich bourgeoisie that profited from the flourishing economy. The individual portraits show parental pride and children's joy, but also family wealth because of possible future connections or marriage deals, including local government positions such as a mayor, in reality often seemingly hereditary positions. Art represents reality at this exhibition of portraits commissioned by parents or made of the painter's own children

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31 Snoep and Huvenne, "Foreword", 6; Bedaux and Ekkart, "Preface", 8.

32 Bedaux and Ekkart, "Preface", 8.

33 Ibid.



**Figure 1:** Cornelis De Vos (1584/85–1651), *Susanna De Vos*, 1627, oil on panel, 80 x 55,5 cm, Frankfurt, Städelches Kunstinstitut.

because we look at real people.<sup>34</sup> As a matter of fact the joyfulness is partly posed, but that is no reason to assume that children from well-to-do families with good clothes, enough food, proud parents, and a plenty of toys could not be happy and joyful. It is true that the dark colors of life, also happening in those families, are absent. The real and joyful children with their proud parents refer to the positive sixteenth and seventeenth centuries realities of the well-to-do.

*The Art of Education in Dordrechts Museum*, held in Dordrecht in 2013, was mainly based on fine art. The topics and sources, among them paintings and drawings, from Dekker's *Het Verlangen naar opvoeden* [The Longing for Education] formed the basis for the exhibition as part of the multimedia project with the same name with as partners the University of Groningen, NTR (Educational

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<sup>34</sup> Bedaux and Ekkart, "Preface", 8: apart from individual or group portraits of children, also group family portraits with children playing a central role were added.

and Cultural Broadcasting Corporation), *Dordrechts Museum*, *Museum Slot Zuylen* in Utrecht, and *Radio 5*. Concept and design of the project were developed by Jack Fila and Yolande Wildschut and of the exhibition by conservator of *Dordrechts Museum* Sander Paarlberg. The accompanying book follows the structure of the project in the exhibition, television and radio broadcasts and contains reproductions of most of the exhibited pieces.<sup>35</sup>

*The Art of Education* shows fine art but with another goal than *Pride and Joy*. Paarlberg, a specialist of seventeenth century iconography, tells that he intends to attract a broader group than the usual museum visitor, namely: “Parents with children, parents made aware of the exhibition through the TV broadcasts, and who ask themselves: how did that [child rearing] go before?” Looking at the fine art and everyday objects “should offer recognition, emotion. And nice if people could learn something from it for the education of their own children.”<sup>36</sup> Fine art should thus stimulate people to reflect about education and child rearing in past and present. There were also available a set of discussion cards for parents, on the front side the image of an exhibited painting and on the back side a description of the depicted scene with a discussion question, for example with the scene of an unruly household by Jan Steen with children doing what they want to do, if children should participate in the decision process about what to eat this evening, about the time to go to bed, and about the destination of next holiday.<sup>37</sup>

*The Art of Education* systematically related past and present and stimulated discussions about child rearing by combining fine art with present educational challenges. Notwithstanding a timespan from the Renaissance until the present, child rearing in the seventeenth century was most often used to connect past and present. This happened with the themes structuring the exhibition and television broadcasts, namely childhood and the family, motherhood, educational ideals, power balance between parent and child, parental concern and children’s risks, going to school, play and toys and the new media, and father and son relationships. Each broadcast started with the presenter looking at a painting about the theme from the exhibition and then moved on to an actual educational dilemma about the same theme in a present educational setting and with comments by educational experts.

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<sup>35</sup> Jack Fila, Jeroen J.H. Dekker, and Yolande Wildschut. *De Kunst van het opvoeden* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2013).

<sup>36</sup> Sander Paarlberg, interviewed by Robin Gerrits, “Van de schoonheid en de troost”, in Fila, Dekker, and Wildschut, *De Kunst van het opvoeden* 8.

<sup>37</sup> *De Kunst van het Opvoeden: Discussiekaarten* (Dordrecht: Dordrechts Museum, 2013), during the exhibition available in the museum shop.

While also in this exhibition many paintings represented well-to-do children and families, in contrast to *Pride and Joy* lower middle-class and poor families were not missing. The intention to use art to stimulate people to discuss about education and child rearing resulted into more social variation in the selection of paintings than *Pride and Joy*, with for example also genre painting, highly popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with stories about the bad consequences of wrong child rearing, and on the exhibition with paintings by the Dutch painter Jan Steen and the Flemish painter David Rijckaert III.<sup>38</sup> While the children's and family portraits do represent real people as in *Pride and Joy*, genre painting did not show real people but patterns of parental behavior with often the message that children do always imitate their parents be it good or bad behavior.

*Being Young in the Nineteenth Century: The Child in Dutch Nineteenth Century Art* was held in *Teylers Museum* in Haarlem in 2019–2020. It was based on fine art and on photographs.<sup>39</sup> The exhibition was designed by chief conservator of the museum, Michiel Plomp, internationally known as an expert of drawings of the great masters of the Renaissance such as Michelangelo. The accompanying catalogue contains a list of all exhibited pieces – sixty paintings, pastels and drawings, and thirty-five photographs– and two essays by conservator Plomp and the historians Arianne Baggerman and Rudolf Dekker in which also most pieces exhibited are described and reproduced.

*Being Young in the Nineteenth Century* tells a story about the nascent world of the child during the nineteenth century, in the exhibition flyer summarized as “From mini-adult to child”, a view that matches with that of *The Child in Our Art* from 1983–1984 in Brussels. Around the exhibition several lectures were organized and, to make this exhibition attractive for adults and children, workshops for families were organized and in the Museum restaurant a huge primer was made by pupils of Haarlem schools to attract as many families as possible to this child-oriented exhibition. Notwithstanding the timespan ending around 1900, the relationship between past and present is crucial in this exhibition too. Its intention was namely to show the visitor that it is only in the course of the nineteenth century that our idea of childhood as a specific stage of development and life started. In early modern Europe children were considered as small adults, a view changed radically in the Enlightenment, in particular by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile* (1762), himself present in an etching (c. 1795) by Augustin Legrand,

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<sup>38</sup> Fila, Dekker and Wildschut, *De Kunst van het opvoeden*, 54–59.

<sup>39</sup> See Brandt Corstius, *De kunst van het moederschap*, catalogue of the exhibition with the same name in Haarlem 1981–82.

whereupon he hands with approval a field bouquet to a mother who feeds her child.<sup>40</sup> Plomp summarizes the historical change leading to this exhibition as follows: “The mini-adult steps aside, the child may be child.”<sup>41</sup>



**Figure 2:** Floris Arntzenius (1864–1925), *The Match Girl* (Het lucifermeisje), c. 1890, oil on canvas, 131 x 76 cm, Haags Historisch Museum, The Hague.

The exhibition shows a diversity of children: boys and girls, babies and toddlers and schoolchildren, children from the city and from the country, and from the well-to-do to the poor. The making of children portraits commissioned by their parents was as in the seventeenth century a lifestyle belonging to well-to-do families. But in this century of increasing class differences because of the

<sup>40</sup> Baggerman and Rudolf Dekker, “De jeugd heeft de toekomst”, 55.

<sup>41</sup> Michiel Plomp, “Jong in de 19<sup>e</sup> eeuw. Het kind in de Nederlandse kunst van 1780 tot 1914”, in *Het kind in de Nederlandse 19<sup>e</sup>-eeuwse kunst*, eds. Arianne Baggerman, Rudolf Dekker, and Michiel Plomp (Bussum: Uitgeverij Thoth; Haarlem: Teylers Museum), 12.

first phase of the industrial revolution, painters gave more attention to the life of children of the poor, for example to child labor. *The Match Girl* from c. 1890 was inspired by Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale and painted by Floris Arntzenius (1864–1925).<sup>42</sup> The disabled girl, aged c. ten, in the evening leaning against a wall in dark and cold The Hague, waits for people ready with their dinner in a well-heated restaurant nearby and willing to buy some matchboxes (Figure 2).

According to Plomp, “for most children’s portraits in the first half of the nineteenth century only the toys present in the paintings tell you that they are representing children [. . .] For the rest they look like small adults. Depicting children as real children almost does not occur in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century.”<sup>43</sup> This means that we should not see much of a reality and that for example the painting with which the exhibition started, a portrait of one year old Catharina Elisabeth Rente Linsen, elegantly dressed and with red coral jewelry around her neck and wrists, made in 1831 by Jan Adam Kruseman (1804–1862), could only



**Figure 3:** Jan Adam Kruseman Jz. (1804–1862), *Portrait of Catharina Elisabeth Rente Linsen (1830–1890)*, 1831, Oil on canvas, 77.2 x 66 cm, Teylers Museum, Haarlem.

<sup>42</sup> Floris Arntzenius (1864–1925), *Het lucifermeisje*, ca. 1890. Collectie: Haags Historisch Museum, Den Haag.

<sup>43</sup> Plomp, “Jong in de 19<sup>e</sup> eeuw”, 22.



be interpreted as that of a small adult. However, and just as with *Pride and Joy* portraits from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, also this portrait could be interpreted as both evidence of parental pride because of the elegant dress and the precious jewelry, and as, behind the dress and jewelry, an image of a one-year-old girl with the plump feet and shoulders of a real baby with a roguish child face (Figure 3).<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

Together, the exhibitions have a large timespan with objects and stories from the Middle Ages until c. 2000, with *Orphans and Children at Risk*, *Children of All Times* and *The Art of Education* covering the whole period and *The Child in Our Art*, *Pride and Joy* and *Being Young* covering respectively the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the nineteenth century. They were organized by museums with the exception of *The Child in Our Art*, organized by a bank, which also was the exhibition's host, and *Orphans and Children at Risk*, initiated by a charitable organization. Whether the location could have been of influence on the public is not clear. But as a matter of fact, people with the intention of visiting a museum will look at art, while customers of a bank will visit a bank for financial matters and then still become interested in art when present in the very bank's building. The design of the exhibitions was made by art historians (*The Child in Our Art*, *Pride and Joy*) and by a cooperation between historians and historians of culture and education, and with *Orphans and Children at Risk*, also in the person of Thom Willemse a psychologist specialized in special education. The story telling in exhibitions with an interdisciplinary team, like *Orphans and Children at Risk* and *The Art of Education*, contained more explicitly historical and educational elements, while the exhibition *Pride and Joy*, designed by art historians, first and foremost focused on the beauty of the pieces of art exhibited. All were accompanied by a catalogue with the exhibited fine art together with, for *Children of All Times*, *Orphans and Children*, and *The Art of Education*, also everyday objects.

The exhibitions showed fine art and told a story about the child and education in the past. For *Orphans and Children at risk*, art was secondary in telling the story about childcare from the Middle Ages until the present, the other exhibitions used first of all art for their story, with *Pride and Joy* showing exclusively a beautiful world of childhood and parenting. Two exhibitions, chronologically the

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<sup>44</sup> See Dekker, 'Van mini-volwassene naar kind?', 40–42.

start and the end of our chronologically composed sample, namely *The Child in Our Art* and *Being Young* based the exhibition design on the view of children as miniature adults until far in the nineteenth century. The other exhibitions do not have such strong views and assume more continuity. A strong view is also behind *Pride and Joy*: it is the opposite of children as miniature adults as an interpretation framework for the portraits of preciously and elegantly dressed children that seemingly look like small adults. The exhibitions become more didactic in the course of the years with various didactical activities accompanying the exhibition for both children and educators.

Past and present were connected in those exhibitions in various ways: by taking a timespan until the present, by connecting past, for example the seventeenth century, with present through a strong view about the historical development of childhood as a distinct stage of life, by a complementary didactic program, and with *The Art of Education* the embedding of the exhibition in a broader project with Radio and TV broadcasts.

All exhibitions show boys and girls from various ages, but concerning social diversity they differ. Two of them, *Orphans and Children* and *Pride and Joy* focus on one specific group respectively the marginal and the upper classes. The other exhibitions try to tell a story of the various social groups but the fact that before the nineteenth century most paintings of children were commissioned by the well-to-do makes this group dominate the early modern period.

The relationship between art and reality is differently interpreted. *The Child in Our Art* and *Being Young* tell the visitor that what she / he sees is sometimes far from the reality of childhood and more about miniature adults, while it is possible to see the same pieces of art totally different, as discussed above. Striking for *Pride and Joy* is that the focus on well-to-do children often seemingly dressed as miniature adults was not impediment at all for interpreting them as images of children with their own world and stage of development. Moreover, all those portraits were of real people, and so realizing a strong reference to reality, as with portraits in the other exhibitions. One way or another all exhibitions wanted to tell a story about childhood and child rearing in past and present about the reality of children's life and parenting and about educational ambitions, for example by showing genre painting.

With this visit in retro respect of the six exhibitions in mind, we turn again to Frank Simon's view on the role of artists and historians in bringing us inside history. Indeed, the solution is not that historians would pursue and perhaps even achieve the same effect as artists do, because they would then "not be historians anymore". There is, however, another option: working together. Cultural historians and historians of education can so to speak work together with artists from the past, by looking at and analyzing their art as sources for bringing us

inside history. That is what was intended in the exhibitions that were analysed in this contribution.

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