



Smithsonian
***Donald W. Reynolds Center for
American Art and Portraiture***

Smithsonian American Art Museum

News

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Smithsonian American Art Museum Opens Exhibition That Explores Childhood in America

“American ABC: Childhood in 19th-Century America,” will be on view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum from July 1 through Sept. 17. The exhibition is one of the most comprehensive art exhibitions in recent decades to deal with images of children and their relationship to the American quest for national identity. The exhibition, which features paintings by Winslow Homer, Thomas Eakins, George Catlin, Eastman Johnson and other well-known artists, was organized by the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University in California.

“This exhibition includes many delightful artworks about children by America’s most revered masters,” said Elizabeth Broun, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the museum. “It’s fascinating to learn how these works reveal concerns that were at the center of national life.”

Over the course of the 19th century, the United States grew from an infant republic to a powerful nation with a prominent place in world affairs. “American ABC” demonstrates how portrayals of the nation’s youngest citizens took on an important symbolic role in the United States’ long journey towards maturity, and provides a window into the everyday life of the period—the world of families, children’s pastimes and the routines of the schoolhouse.

Featuring paintings, prints, photographs and books selected from major museums, libraries, archives and private collections throughout the United States, “American ABC” explores the connection between images of the American child and the democratic ideals of the young United States. The exhibition centers on six childhood types: the country boy, the American girl, the African American child, the urban waif, the Native American child and the child in school. “American ABC” also includes a wide variety of illustrated children’s books, such as Mark Twain’s “Huck Finn,” Noah Webster’s “Elementary Spelling Book,” McGuffey’s readers and colorful ABC primers.

“The exhibition is about 19th-century Americans who were trying to live up to the Founding Fathers’ vision for the United States,” said Claire Perry, exhibition curator and curator of American art

at the Cantor Arts Center. “As these citizens confronted the economic, political and racial problems of their time—the same issues we struggle with today—they created idealized images of American children that pointed the way to a bright future for the nation.” The exhibition’s presentation at the Smithsonian American Art Museum also will include artworks from the museum’s permanent collection. Paintings by George Catlin and several sculptures, including works by Thomas Crawford, Harriet Hosmer and William Henry Rinehart among others, will be included at this venue only. Programs and activities for children will take place in a re-creation of a 19th-century schoolroom that is based on depictions by Winslow Homer.

Tour

The exhibition premieres at the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University, Calif. (Feb. 1 – May 7) and then travels to the Smithsonian American Art Museum (July 1 – Sept. 17) and the Portland Museum of Art in Maine (Nov. 1 – Jan. 7, 2007).

Credit

“American ABC: Childhood in 19th-Century America” was organized by the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University. The exhibition, accompanying book and related programs are made possible by the generosity of Carmen Christensen with additional support from Peter and Helen Bing, the Hohbach Family Fund and Cantor Arts Center members. Peter and Helen Bing and Zions Bank support the presentation at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Publication

The book that accompanies the exhibition, “Young America: Childhood in 19th-Century Art and Culture,” is written by Claire Perry and is jointly published by the Cantor Arts Center and Yale University Press.

The Smithsonian American Art Museum collection began with gifts of art donated to the federal government in 1829 and has evolved into one of the world’s most important American art holdings, with approximately 40,000 artworks in all media, spanning more than three centuries. The museum’s National Historic Landmark building, currently under renovation, is located at Eighth and F Streets N.W. in the heart of a revitalized downtown arts district, above the Gallery Place/Chinatown Metrorail station (Red, Yellow and Green lines). When the building opens July 1, it will be an outstanding showcase for American art and portraiture that celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans. Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 357-1729 (TTY). Recorded information: (202) 275-1500. Please visit the museum’s Web site at www.americanart.si.edu or www.reynoldscenter.org.

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Note to Editors: Selected high-resolution images for publicity only may be downloaded from <ftp://saam-press@ftp.si.edu>. Call (202) 275-1594 for the password. Additional information about the exhibition will be available from the museum’s online press room.