CHAPTER 1

An Introduction to Interpreting Images of Family, Mother and Child, and the Home*

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1.1 Subject of Study

Recently there has been a slight boom in exhibitions related to children, families and the home. For example, from 2001 through 2002, the Denver Art Museum and the Newark Museum held a large-scale exhibition entitled *Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt*.\(^1\) This exhibition presented both genre scenes and portraits that conveyed a sense of the lives of the Dutch in the seventeenth century, displayed alongside actual examples of various furnishings, dishware and other household goods. The exhibition not only introduced the lives of seventeenth-century Dutch people, it also considered questions such as, what position did the family have in Dutch society at the time; what were the relationships between husband and wife, families and children; what role did art play in the home, and what was the relationship between art and the home? In other words, this epoch-making exhibition displayed art works not solely as objects of aesthetic appreciation, but presented them within their social paradigm specifically as related to and within the context of the home. Interestingly, following this exhibition, a similar experiment was tried, this time an exhibition on Italian Renaissance art, *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, held in 2006 at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.\(^2\) Another exhibition related to children was held in 2007 at the Städel Museum, Frankfurt, and the Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, entitled *The Changing Face of Childhood: British Children's Portraits and their Influence*.\(^3\) This exhibition focused on British works from the Enlightenment and Romantic periods and their great trend towards pictures depicting children. The exhibition catalog included articles exploring the pictorial tradition of depicting children in Western art, as well as articles referring to the various debates at the time regarding children.

* Translation from Japanese into English: Martha J. McClintock.
These types of exhibitions, of course, were also held in Japan. In recent memory, in 2008, the National Art Center, Tokyo, and the National Museum of Art, Osaka, held an exhibition entitled *L’enfant dans les collections du Musée du Louvre*. As its title suggests, this exhibition presented works from the Louvre spanning antiquity to the mid-nineteenth century, focusing on Europe but also including Egypt and the Orient, in its consideration of how children were expressed in art, and what stimulated the production of art on the subject of children. The exhibition's selection of approximately 200 works was definitely worth seeing.

Similarly in 2007, at the National Art Center, Tokyo, I was one of the supervisors of an exhibition titled *Milkmaid by Vermeer and Dutch Genre Painting – Masterworks from the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam*. It goes without saying that the principal goal of this exhibition was two-fold, the display of *The Milkmaid*, a particularly famous work by Vermeer, and offering Japanese visitors an opportunity to see this seminal work. In fact, those were not the only aims of the exhibition. We also wanted to explore the question of what was the social position of this woman pouring milk in the picture, commonly known today as the milkmaid, and how was this painting understood and interpreted at the time of its creation. We made a selection of genre paintings from the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam depicting various types of women, whose principle subject was a female, whether a female servant, an essential part of a wealthy seventeenth-century Dutch home, a housewife, or even a tavern prostitute. Through this display we explored how women were expressed in paintings and prints, while also considering how Dutch families and households of the period were considered. It is, however, possible that this aim was not properly conveyed to visitors. Given the huge media focus on the Japanese debut of Vermeer's masterpiece *The Milkmaid*, the visitors to the venues focused solely on this one painting. In the face of the feverish art aficionados who wanted to fully experience Vermeer's superb artistry, it was as if the other paintings on display vanished. For the author, it was an opportunity to realize the difficulty in conveying an exhibition's true conceptual basis.

Prior to these exhibitions, in the autumn of 2001 the Tokyo National Museum presented an exhibition of Japanese art works entitled *Wonder and Joy: Children in Japanese Art*. Unfortunately the author did not see this exhibition, but in April of that year, it was announced that Crown Princess Masako was pregnant, and on December 1, 2001 Princess Aiko was born. Thus this exhibition

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