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Children and Objects

This article examines children’s relationships to objects as revealed in selected Impressionist paintings and autobiographical writing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, analyzing some of the ways in which objects are depicted as means of understanding the past, exploring the self, or making sense of the world through story-telling. The often overlooked objects of still life are transformed in these depictions from inanimate objects into vitally important subjects.

As Gustave Flaubert insisted in an early letter, “pour qu’une chose soit intéressante il suffit de la regarder longtemps,” (1: 192) a conviction he later intensified by adding: “l’objet le plus trivial produit des inspirations sublimes” (1: 427). Two paintings in a recent exhibition of Impressionist still life seize the attention with their beautifully intense yet understated evocations of the role of objects in the imaginative life of children, what Henry James calls “the wonder of consciousness in everything” (4). Both Berthe Morisot in Sous la véranda and Paul Gauguin in his Portrait de Clovis Gauguin1 emphasize that the powerful role that Flaubert attributes to objects seems immediately evident to children, who enter into those sublime inspirations with apparent ease.2 As Walter Pater puts it in his evocative short piece, “The Child in the House,” this

1 Both these paintings, each of which dates from 1884, are in private collections, but are beautifully reproduced in Rathbone and Shackleford’s Impressionist Still Life, pages 151 and 153.

2 But compare Rémusat 34: “l’enfance n’est pas observatrice, la mienne du moins l’était très peu.”
is part of the law that makes the material objects about them loom so large in children’s lives (17).

By depicting her daughter, Julie Manet, deep in silent contemplation of a flower, Morisot’s painting plays, both in its title and its representation, on questions of thresholds: the veranda is that liminary space between the house and the outside world, just as the child’s meditation situates her both within the confines of the real world and in the vast reaches of the imagination. She, too, hovers on the threshold between childhood and womanhood, looking into the heart of the flower at a point where she is still free from at least most of the cultural and experiential baggage that adults inevitably bring to such contemplation. Spatially the work reinforces the concept of thresholds. The outside world is seen through the glass windows of the veranda, windows that are suggested by the structural supports rather than by any hint of physical presence, a theme quietly echoed in the glass pitcher, with its spiral fluting hinting at a possibility of movement counteracted by the motionless state of the water. Julie is seen in profile, her eyes hidden from us both by the position of her face and by the fall of a chestnut curl. As onlookers, particularly adult onlookers, we cannot enter her imaginative world, although we are invited to enter our own, to recover that wonder at objects that marks the child, and that Flaubert too urges his correspondent to rediscover.

Gauguin’s painting is more decorative and less representational than Morisot’s, a choice both justified and enabled by the fact that the child is depicted as sleeping, its hand still clutching a copper pot. The background wallpaper with its intense blues and its indications of flowers and leaves hovers between the realistic and the imaginary, providing the same kind of link between the two that Morisot offers with the suggestion of glass windows in her painting. Looking is replaced here by dreaming, in a way that may exclude the viewer from the specific dream yet nevertheless focuses on the notion of dreaming and on its source in objects.

In an early article, Marcel Proust offers a dazzling comparison between the objects of everyday life and their transposition into art. He imagines a young man whose means and artistic tastes are equally limited and whose imagination is filled with “la gloire des musées, des

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3 Although not published until 1954, this article appears to have been written in 1895 (see Proust, Contre Sainte-Beuve 885).