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# The Visual Image of the Child in Western and African Art

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## **Abstract**

It is assumed that before about the middle of the seventeenth century the symbol of the child or indeed any sort of awareness of childhood was non-existent in the Western world, the child being then a shadowy figure, existing in the periphery, unimportant, therefore unattended. 'Rational man in conflict with an impersonal universe was the theme of pre-romantic literature,' writes the critic of Henry James, 'the unformed, unthinking child had no role to play in it.'^ Peter Covene/s observation on the treatment of children as subsidiary elements in an adult world is that 'until the last decades of the eighteenth century the child did not exist as an important and continuous theme in English literature/^ Not only among literateurs but even among social historians, the child seems to have been rated insignificant. Peter Laslett, while recognizing the fact that children were abundantly present in preindustrial times, notes,

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It is assumed that before about the middle of the seventeenth century the symbol of the child or indeed any sort of awareness of childhood was non-existent in the Western world, the child being then a shadowy figure, existing in the periphery, unimportant, therefore unattended. 'Rational man in conflict with an impersonal universe was the theme of pre-romantic literature,' writes the critic of Henry James, 'the unformed, unthinking child had no role to play in it.'<sup>1</sup> Peter Coveney's observation on the treatment of children as subsidiary elements in an adult world is that 'until the last decades of the eighteenth century the child did not exist as an important and continuous theme in English literature.'<sup>2</sup> Not only among literateurs but even among social historians, the child seems to have been rated insignificant. Peter Laslett, while recognizing the fact that children were abundantly present in pre-industrial times, notes,

there is something mysterious about the silence of all these multitudes of babes in arms, toddlers and adolescents in the statements men made at the time about their own experience. Children appear, of course, but so seldom and in such an indefinite way that we know very little indeed about child nurture in pre-industrial times, and no confident promise can be made of knowledge yet to come.<sup>3</sup>

That children died in large numbers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries appears to reinforce several writers' opinion of the obscurity of childhood in pre-industrial times. Laslett adds, 'It is in fact an effort of the mind to remember all the time that children were always present in such numbers in the traditional world, nearly half the whole community living in a condition of semi-oblivion, many of them never destined to become persons at all.'<sup>4</sup>

Artistic representation of childhood in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance confirm the notion that children were treated as 'miniature adults' who appear 'childish' only in comparison with the adult. The child is seldom the principal subject of the picture; his presence is a

detail in a complex scene as in Crivelli's *The Annunciation* (15th century).<sup>5</sup> Funeral monuments in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries served not only as tableaux asserting birth and lineage but were important as family records. It was possible to trace a man's ancestry from the elaborate display of heraldry and coat-of-arms on his tomb; further the monument often bore figures of his wife and children on it. The child did not at first appear on his own tomb but on that of his parents.<sup>6</sup> He was generally depicted as a diminutive creature by his mother's side or at his parents' feet. The rigid funeral pose was abandoned after 1625, and religious emotionalism crept into English sculpture. Display of emotion demanded a freer and a more flexible pose. The mourners on the tomb, while frequently being rows of expressionless kneeling figures, from time to time exhibited parental and filial sorrow and deep affection. Dead children were sometimes identified on tombs with labels bearing their Christian names. While monuments exclusively devoted to children were comparatively rare prior to the seventeenth century, Gaignieres's records show that as early as 1584 and 1608 there were some tombs bearing effigies of children on their own. Princess Sophia, who died as a baby in 1606, was commemorated with a tomb by Maximilian Colt, in the form of a cradle with a child asleep in it.

The challenges presented to the sculptor of the early tombs included problems of proportion and size. While the smaller tombs effectively produced diminutive kneeling figures, wholly free-standing, on top of a ledge, in a prominent position, this arrangement proved inadequate in the case of the larger monuments. The discrepancy arising between the proportions of parents and those of children on funeral monuments of the early sixteenth century were gradually circumvented later in the period. On the tomb of Sir Anthony Cooke (d. 1576), at Romford, the parents are shown as life-size, kneeling figures rather than recumbent, and the children are also presented life-size, kneeling and free-standing, placed upon the top of a ledger. These developments in the presentation of funeral sculptures indicate a general and growing awareness and observation of children, and an attempt to present the relatively separate experiences of the subjects. On a conventional monument of Thomas Andrews (d. 1590), at Charwelton, Northants, the presence of the child is poignantly expressed. While the other descendants kneel in prayer, the youngest daughter is shown, gently bending over her little brother, and holding him to prevent his falling over. Critics have drawn attention to the fact that 'such a rendering of childish artlessness, of a child's innocence of the pomps and ceremonies of her elders' is a significant development in the presentation of childhood in art.<sup>7</sup> Apart from funeral monuments and tombs, images of parents and children also appeared on panels of stained glass in churches.<sup>8</sup>

The religious iconography of childhood in the Middle Ages focused its attention on the significance of the ordinary child. The child at the centre of the Holy Family is the *putto*, a symbolic representation that originated in Italy in the Quattrocento, a curious combination of a figure from antique art and the Christian angel of the Middle Ages.<sup>9</sup> The *putto* was never a historic child but the motif was widely adopted in religious iconography. The *putto* was a decorative device depicted on altars and shrines. He appeared in the guise of a good genius, as a guardian angel, as a playfellow to the Christ-child, accompanying mankind from the cradle to the grave. The *putto* was a stylized presentation of childhood; Christianity idealized childhood and the innocence associated with it. So the *putto* became infant Christ in the works of art by Veronese, Poussin and Francesco Francia. In the hands of some Italian sculptors like Desiderio da Settignano the *putti* became children of varying ages taken directly out of the familiar life of Florence in the Quattrocento. Medieval art customarily represented death and the soul by means of nude child figures long before the child acquired a definite personality or individuality. The departure of the soul from the body and its entry into the world were depicted in terms of naked children, usually sexless. Nebulous, pure and innocent, and fresh from its source, the child served as an excellent symbol of the spirit that could be divorced from the gross matter of everyday life. Thus the *putto* with its *joie de vivre* also brought with it grim, moral implications of good and evil. By a strange process of evolution the *putto* with a skull on medals and woodcuts came to represent death in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>10</sup> The man who conceived the design was Giovanni Boldu, a Venetian medalist. His medal of 1458 depicts a winged, nude *putto* who reclines on a big skull and clutches a bundle of flames in his left hand. The *putto* appears to be a genius of Death carrying the soul to Heaven. The *putto* with his 'chubby cheeks and dimpled limbs' now assumes an expression of adult maturity and calm. Symbolic children continued to exist in art in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, even in household china - cream jugs, vases, inkstands and so on. The name of Johann Joachim Kaendler (1705-1775) is associated with the best works of this species. Kaendler introduced the European style of relief decoration and figure modelling into this art. Most of these porcelain figures were made between 1740 and 1750 and won great popularity throughout Europe.

The representation of childhood in African art has to be approached from the standpoint that the African concept of childhood is profoundly different from that of the western world. Traditional African societies are not child-centred in the way British and American societies have grown to be. A return to childhood in western societies has been seen

as a return to a certain 'primitivism', before one is circumscribed and crippled by social mores. The theme is a recurrent one in western art and literature - the moving back from age to youth, the preference of untutored naivety and innocence to formally educated maturity. In every case, the rebellion is seen as a surrender of established society and the accepted achievements of civilization. In post-industrial times particularly, it appears to be the case that the figure of the child and childhood experience emerges to embody an ideal seen as antithetical to 'modern life'.

The African artist, it has to be borne in mind, does not work in a context of isolation, alienation, doubt and intellectual conflict, or any such experience which has made the child an attractive artistic and literary theme for the western artist. The African artist is an integral member of the community; he works within an artistic tradition that has developed over several centuries. Most African art, it is assumed, is religious; where it is secular it is maintained that it exists for a specific social purpose - the decorations on masks, the carved handle of a cooking spoon or the symbolic representations on a pot-lid. Such arguments, like the other ethnocentric arguments about African art, are not useful in our appreciation of the works of African artists. Art historians have pointed out that art for art's sake is a relatively recent phenomenon even in the western world - in the past, European art customarily had a social function and purpose, whether it was to please the vanities of a parent who wished to have a portrait of his child painted or to edify the minds of the devout and the faithful.<sup>11</sup>

An important constraint in a study of African art is the lack of sources, commentaries and other documentation to fall back upon. Factors such as the date and place of composition, historical events that took place during the period of composition and so on assist us in our appreciation of western art. These facts are not readily available in the case of African art. Again, a study of traditional African art points to the fact that most African art (with exceptions such as the idealised naturalism of the art style of Ife) is extremely stylized. Hence, the meaning one derives from the sculpture need not necessarily be the meaning the artist intended to convey. It is common knowledge that there were several inhibitions concerning the naturalistic representation of the human face. This included accusations of witchcraft.

It is a significant fact that while realistic and symbolic treatment of childhood crowd the art world in the west, in the twentieth century, children are strangely absent or only marginally present in African art, particularly African sculpture. Like Crivelli's little girl in the periphery of *The Annunciation*, these infants and children peer from behind their mothers' backs or gaze up at the mother while sucking her breast. The

mother-with-child composition appears to be the most frequently adopted form in this context - the theme has been exquisitely treated by individual African artists. The question is repeatedly posed by art critics as to whether the mother-and-child concept was inspired by Christian iconography or by African fertility cults.<sup>12</sup> There seems to be enough evidence to suggest that the theme is rooted in African sociocultural patterns - the exaltation of motherhood is common to many African societies. The *Afo Mother and Child* sculpture presents the mother in a frontal position, seated with her hands on her knees. While one child sits on her shoulders, another sucks her breast. It is interesting to note that the baby at the breast has well-developed breasts herself, and seems to suggest that this composition is not of an ordinary mother and child, but of a female ancestor, the mother of the Afo people. The figure is highly stylized, the elongated neck, scarification marks and the pendulous breasts. Yet another treatment of the mother-and-child image is depicted on the staff carried by a devotee from the temple of Shongo in Ogbomosho. The Yoruba mother in the composition kneels, while her hands are locked behind her, supporting the baby on her back. The child, a miniature version of the mother, clasps the mother securely while looking away from her. The stylization is striking and is in keeping with the aesthetics of Yoruba sculptures - the bulging eyes, the protruding lips and the scarification marks.

An interesting comparison is the *Mother and Child* figures on the staff-top of the Zulu, South Africa. Here, the mother stands erect, slim and serene, while a baby clings desperately to her back. There is a compactness about the mother and the child as a whole which is aesthetically very appealing - they form a harmonious unit on the head of the Zulu staff. It is evident, however, that the emphasis in the composition is on the beauty and dignity of the mother. The child is merely a miniature human figure. The *Mother and Child* image carved in rich, red sandstone by a contemporary Zimbabwean artist, Lazarus Kumalo, is a unique variation on the theme. The figures are squat and compact - the mother in a frontal pose embraces the baby against her breast. M.W. Mount comments on the coarse facial features of the mother and her massive, bulky limbs, and draws attention to the fact that the style is 'reminiscent of some early Romanesque works from provincial European centres'.<sup>13</sup> The baby, curiously enough, is a much more realistic presentation than earlier sculptures of the child.

The striking feature of these Mother-and-Child compositions is that the work as a whole carries symbolic weight and meaning. It may be a celebration of fecundity and motherhood when presented on its own. It may be a realistic portrayal of a common image - the mother with the baby on her back or at her breast. The focus, however, is seldom

on the child in terms of psychological insights or romantic illusions. The Mother-and-Child composition in African art is not solely concerned with the child but is a suitable medium in which the child appears, with varying degrees of maturity and adult composure. Looking at such works of art it has to be remembered that the sculpture before us has little, if anything, to do with the point of view of the African child, or with the child's experience of the world. Unlike the miniature figures on funeral monuments, other diminutive figures in African sculpture cannot be identified altogether as being representations of childhood.

Erhabor Emokpae's highly stylized *Mother and Child* (Nigeria) composition is a culmination of the genre in modern African art. The painting is composed of lines and triangles with a background of an African woman's cooking utensils, presented in a semi-transparent fashion. It is essentially an abstract composition made up of geometric shapes which convey effectively the idea of mother and child.

An interesting variation on the theme is the wood sculpture of a *Father of Twins* (Bangwa, Cameroun), seated, flanked by his twin children, one of either sex. Being miniature replicas of the father figure, the child figures say very little about the nature of childhood or attitudes to childhood in particular African societies. From historic records it is gathered that the birth of twins was of special significance in some African societies - the mother and the father of twins were often honoured by having statues carved of them and their children. Robert Brain comments that 'twin mothers and fathers may become diviners and priestesses - having given birth to little gods they are considered to be appropriate vehicle for supernatural action'.<sup>14</sup>

The child on his own is a rarity in African art. There is a curious absence of anecdotal studies of childhood - a form which has been successfully treated in literary works such as Chukwuemeka Ike's *The Potter's Wheel* and Camara Laye's *The African Child*. Period-pieces of childhood reflecting the social history of individual African societies is a relatively rare and recent phenomenon. The charcoal drawing of *Two Children* by Julian Motau (South Africa) speaks for itself. The composition presents a haunting image of hunger and poverty. The children in the drawing have the wizened expression of men grown old with care and anxiety. Their limbs are emaciated and contorted. Motau's *Mother and Child* composition, also done in charcoal, expresses a similar anguish. The tonal pattern is created by varying the texture of the lines. The pictures prove beyond doubt that Motau's art 'is strongly rooted in social realism'.<sup>15</sup> The dark and putrefying images of horror conveyed by his drawings come disturbingly close to the real situation in South Africa today.

The use of the child as a motif to comment on the goings-on in the adult world can be found in the works of a contemporary South African sculptor and graphic artist, Mslaba Zwelidumile Mxgasi, better known as Dumile. Dumile's *African Guernica*, a charcoal drawing, is a symbolic yearning for a lost innocence that has been replaced by the corruptions of modern African life. The central figures are aptly described as 'apocalyptic in appearance, screaming a message of warning and doom to the modern world'.<sup>16</sup> A detail from the drawing shows an infant feeding from a cow, suggesting as it seems, the harsh realities of life that force mothers to go to work for economic reasons, leaving young children at home. The focus of the drawing is not on the child as such - Dumile's figures seem to exist in a world without perspective or depth - but the presence of the infant adds a certain poignancy to the scene.

The infantile proportions of the wooden figures which stand on boxes containing ancestors' bones of the Fang of Gabon is a curious comment on the eternal life-cycle of humans. The figures are free-standing, a combination of adult torso and head and flexed infantile limbs. The sculptures emphasize the Fang belief that the new-born babe has come from its ancestors - a state of pre-existence that unites the ancestor and the infant. Hence, the contradictions in his physical make up. Teresa Musoke's *Symbols of Birth and New Life* (oil on hardboard, Uganda) and Gerard Sekoto's *Mother and Child* (oil on canvas, South Africa) are other contemporary representations of childhood in art. Children continue to feature in African art but largely through the medium of the Mother-and-Child composition - the form being the most ubiquitous visual phenomenon in traditional African societies. Moreover, motherhood and fecundity are important social values and find their appropriate place in art. Stylization is preferred, generally, to naturalistic and realistic representation in African art. The preciseness and symmetry with which African sculpture is carved has awakened great interest in the western art world. Western art critics are growing to appreciate the intricacies of the African art form, its symbolism and its social function. In the western art scene, the child has been immortalized in visual arts, in portraiture, in sculpture and in the intimate conversation pieces. The child has moved from the periphery to the centre of cultural interest. Artists have captured abundantly the energy and high-spiritedness of childhood; children in their natural daily pursuits, petting animals, playing in the street or asleep in the cradle. The symbolic child in western art is frequently modelled on the real child (as Joshua Reynolds' symbolic children were) and on the artist's observation of the real child. From a relative disregard in its early beginnings, the image of childhood in art indicates a growing awareness of the nature of childhood,

its whims and fancies, and a growing relish in the portrayal of the child as a child. A contemporary Nigerian poet and dramatist, Samson Q.O. Amali, has perceptively conveyed the mother-and-child image in the following poem:<sup>17</sup>

Look at that child,  
trotting after his mother  
Her strides get wider and wider  
faster and faster, unaware.  
He quickens his trotting to catch up with her;  
The more he tries,  
The more the gap she leaves behind her for him.

Life contains both her and him.  
Both share life, take out of life their own share  
give to life what they have.

She strides on gracefully for her child and herself  
unaware  
Her child still follows her  
They shall never level  
And even if they level  
They shall never be the same  
For life and nature have separated them eternally

One contains the other  
And each shall remain a distinct self  
A mother and her child.

## NOTES

1. Muriel G. Shine, *The Fictional Children of Henry James* (North Carolina, 1969), p. 3.
2. *The Image of Childhood* (Harmondsworth, 1967), p. 29.
3. *The World We Have Lost* (London, 1971), p. 110.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
5. See Peter Fuller, 'Uncovering Childhood', *Changing Childhood*, ed. Martin Hoyles (London, 1979), pp. 79-80.
6. Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood* (Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 38.
7. Eric Mercer, *English Art 1553-1625* (Oxford, 1962), p. 242. I am indebted to Mercer for his excellent discussion of funeral monuments.
8. For a discussion of the Verney Family on stained glass, formerly in the chapel at Compton Verney, Warwickshire, see H.T. Kirby, 'The Compton Verney Glass', *Country Life* (April 1954), 1132-1133.
9. Wilhelm Bode, *Florentine Sculptors of the Renaissance* (New York, 1969).
10. Horst W. Janson, 'The Putto with the Death's Head', *The Art Bulletin*, XIX (September 1937), 423-449.

11. Frank Willett, *African Art* (London, 1975).
12. Eugene Roosens, *Images Africaines de la mère et l'enfant* (Paris, 1967).
13. *African Art: the Years Since 1920* (Bloomington, 1973), p. 25.
14. *Art and Society in Africa* (London, 1980), p. 196.
15. E.J. De Jager, 'Five South African Artists', *African Arts*, Vol. XI, No. 2 (January 1978), 50.
16. *Ibid.*, 55.
17. 'Strides', *Worlds within Worlds and other Poems* (Ibadan, 1970), p. 13.

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