

New Directions in Children's Portraiture

By ALIX FINKELSTEIN



For the privileged children of late 19th-century Europe and North America, becoming the focal point of a great artist's exacting eye must have seemed an interminably tedious affair. Marie-Louise Pailleron, who sat for one of the earliest child portraits made by John Singer Sargent, battled with the young painter over the duration of her sittings, what type of stockings she would wear, and even how her hair would be combed. Yet after several months' effort, Sargent's genius transformed the girl's defiance into a compelling psychological statement. Indeed, his beautifully painted double portrait of Marie-Louise and her brother Edouard (1881) heralded Sargent's arrival as a daring and penetrating chronicler of human nature.

Prior to the 1850s, children's portraiture was essentially limited to the offspring of noblemen, royalty, and the very rich or privileged. As the fortunes of the burgeoning middle classes grew, however, this genre gained cachet and commissions multiplied. Portraits of children that are now viewed as masterpieces — such as Sargent's vision of the Paillerons — stand out among the era's most inventive works, in any genre.

These painters' sophisticated treatment of their young subjects provided evidence of how views of children were changing, both in the *atelier* and in the world at large. "My sense is that we are drawn to these works because the images are far stronger than what we would ordinarily expect for depicting children. We're forced to acknowledge that these children have independent thoughts to which we may or may not be privy," says art historian Barbara Dayer Gallati, author of *Children of the Gilded Era: Portraits of Sargent, Renoir, Cassatt, and Their Contemporaries* (2004, Merrell Publishers).

It is this respect for, and desire to reveal, a child's emerging personality that motivate many of today's leading representational artists to include children's portraiture in their *oeuvre*. Fortunately, it is not just the technical skills of earlier masters — the *bravura* brushwork, the sophisticated palette, and the sensitive compositions — that contemporary portraitists seek to emulate. Like their historical antecedents, these contemporary painters also seek to convey our collective, evolving understanding of the nature of childhood itself.

"What I see in portraiture today is a very democratic spirit, and that extends to depictions of children as well. But these so-called 'casual' images are made using traditional techniques in new and interesting ways," says Brandon Brame Fortune, curator of painting and sculpture at the National Portrait Gallery, a branch of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. Fortune cites the finalists in the NPG's 2009 *Outwin Boochéver Portrait Competition* as exam-



JOHN SINGER SARGENT (1856-1925)
 PORTRAIT OF EDOUARD AND MARIE-LOUISE PAILLERON
 1881, OIL ON CANVAS, 60 x 69 IN.
 DES MOINES ART CENTER

plars of the "vitality and variety seen in children's portraiture today." Among the invited works this year is David Eichenberg's exquisitely painted and quietly humorous painting of a baby with her pacifier, which both tweaks and honors traditions of the Italian Renaissance. In the opposite direction of the historical spectrum, Laura Chasman's economical gouache portrait of a preteen boy brings to mind the smooth surfaces of David Hockney.

MORE THAN MERE LIKENESS

In order for portraiture to transcend its mimetic imperatives, it must present an interpretation of the sitter that is both contemporary and timeless. Toward that end, the best portraitists bring to their easel a lifetime of study of the human figure, as well as a profound aware-

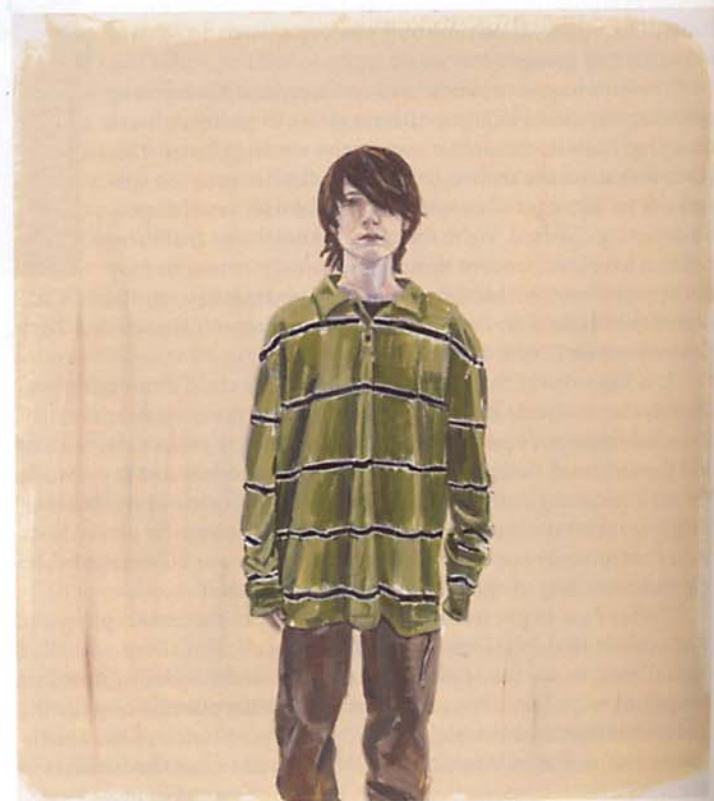


DAVID EICHENBERG (b. 1972)
DUCHESS OF TOLEDO
 2008, OIL ON PANEL, 11 x 8 1/2 IN.
 COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

portant influences. Her subdued, earthy palette and small-scale canvases convey the sobriety of childhood without sacrificing tenderness. "I like to work small so that I can build up the paint quickly. My paintings are very tactile, almost impressionistic in that I don't rely on blending the colors, but rather on layering the paint," Schneider notes. Placing her sitters in a darkened interior with one strong light source helps contours of the face and head to become forcefully present, and also the sculptural qualities of her brushwork to emerge.

When artists step outdoors to paint children, the landscape around them becomes critical. It also evokes our deeply rooted beliefs in the paradisiacal innocence of children that first found creative expression in Thomas Gainsborough's *The Painter's Daughters Chasing a Butterfly* (c. 1756). As a dedicated plein-airist who paints the dramatic coastline of Maine's Penobscot Bay, John Schmidtberger is frequently asked to paint portraits of children that combine his rapid execution and spontaneous responses to landscape with

his sensitive rendering of the figure. Schmidtberger tends to approach his subjects from a distance, which means that "likeness" resides in the child's posture and body language. "John painted our daughter Tara when she turned 16," recalls Colleen Oberg, who owns a cottage near Schmidtberger in the Victorian village of Bayside, situated along the Penobscot. "Tara posed for him leaning against a group of rocks overlooking the bay, one of her favorite places to play



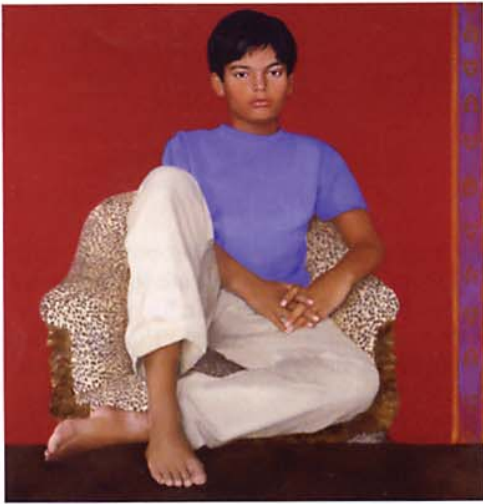
LAURA CHASMAN (b. 1946)
NICHOLAS
 2008, GOUACHE ON MUSEUM MOUNTING BOARD, 12 x 11 IN.
 COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

ness of the accomplishments of their historical predecessors, from the delicate precision of the Renaissance to the charged impasto of modernism. Contemporary realist Sharon Sprung has painted a number of children's portraits and says her ambitions for them are no less than those for her adult portraits. "I am not interested in painting children as cute little beings," she says. "That's not how I see them. I want figures of depth, insight, and personality."

At the same time, the artist must have a true sympathy for the exuberance and unpredictability of children, and enjoy the challenges and rewards of working with young people. Brenda Zlamany, a Brooklyn-based oil painter, appreciates their lack of self-consciousness: "Children's faces are not hiding things," she says. "They do not pose artificially and they do not edit themselves." Although many artists draw preparatory sketches before starting to paint, few expect children to endure long hours of posing. Zlamany, like most of her peers, uses photographs, both her own and those taken by the family, to investigate a child's personality, behavior, and appearance. "I probably shoot 500 digital photos or more," she explains. "The painting doesn't copy a specific photo. The photos operate like a movie that gives me insight into my subject." Ultimately, Zlamany says, the goal is to achieve a "shared artistic vision," one that reflects both the patron's and the artist's perspectives on the child.

TODAY'S CHILDREN SEEN THROUGH TRADITIONAL LENSES

Katy Schneider, a Massachusetts figure painter, situates most of her scenes in the cluttered yet comfortable households of the typical American family. When she expanded her *oeuvre* to include intimate studies of babies and toddlers, her first models were her own children. Schneider cites Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard as two of her most im-



SHARON SPRUNG (b. 1953)
ARJUN GARG
 2009, OIL ON PANEL, 42 x 40 IN.
 COLLECTION DR. AND MRS. RAJ GARG



SHARON SPRUNG (b. 1953)
SURYA GARG
 2009, OIL ON PANEL, 42 x 40 IN.
 COLLECTION DR. AND MRS. RAJ GARG

as a child, so the setting is not only beautiful, but also has tremendous emotional significance for our family.”

THE NEW SOCIETY PORTRAIT

Children’s portraiture once demanded that the sitter be dressed in formal attire, which emphasized the wealth and prestige of the patron. In recent decades, however, such materialist concerns have generally taken a back seat to a more abiding desire to convey familial love for the child and to concentrate on her or his individuality. In keeping with these societal changes, a taste for casual elegance has emerged within the genre. Dress may be formal, but the child is presented in a relaxed, informal manner. Palettes have also shifted to reflect a growing preference for bright, contemporary colors. “My clients, particularly those from California and Texas, don’t want a portrait that would look good hanging in the damp greyish climate and darkened homes of dreary old England,” says Pam Osborn, director of Andreeva Gallery in Henderson, Nevada, which represents many acclaimed portraitists. “They want a lighter palette that reflects the bright sunlight of the West and the brilliant colors people like to wear.”

Sharon Sprung’s portraits of the siblings Arjun and Surya Garg perfectly illustrate this new trend toward “smart casual.” Seated barefoot in a leopard print armchair, the siblings gaze directly at us, projecting confidence and ease. A vivid red background with fuchsia and turquoise accents adds drama and excitement to Sprung’s stunning portrayals. “I like very bright rich colors that are contemporary,” she

comments. “I paint people of today and I don’t want to paint dark backgrounds. To me, color is incredibly expressive. It’s both an aesthetic choice and a reflection of the child’s personality.” Both children, Sprung reports, were very involved in many decisions, from what they would wear to how they would be seated: “When you involve children in the process, you get to know them as individuals and hopefully the painting will be true to who they really are, no matter what their ages.”

Color is also important to Brenda Zlamany’s spare, yet meticulously rendered portraits. Painting on panel, she places the

child against one strong color, such as black or yellow. Layers of glazes create a subtle glow that appears to light Zlamany’s sitters from within. Devoting most of the picture plane to their faces, she eschews the inclusion of possessions or other iconographic clues to personal history, seeking instead to capture a particular “psychological moment.” “My paintings,” she explains, “are very simple and don’t have a lot of things



BRENDA ZLAMANY (b. 1960)
PORTRAIT #91 (JUSTIN)
 2006, OIL ON PANEL, 12 x 12 IN.
 COLLECTION NAT AND GEORGIA KRAMER



KATY SCHNEIDER (b. 1964)

JACK

1998, OIL ON PANEL, 13 X 10 IN.
PRIVATE COLLECTION

in them. So the narrative comes from the painting's foundations: how the figure is painted, the shape of the rectangle, where the figure is located, and the color of the ground."

Collectors and critics have responded positively to the new aesthetics of children's portraiture. In view of the costs and time invested, patrons must choose wisely among the growing number of portraitists eager for commissions. Many collectors seek the advice of a portrait broker or a gallery specializing in portraiture. These intermediaries offer considerable advantages to the client: In addition to coordinating all the financial and travel arrangements, a broker shares her or his extensive knowledge and can recommend the most suitable names from a long (and potentially daunting) list of artists. "I also advise my clients to request artists' recent images of children the same age and gender as their own," says Pam Osborn. "Artists who are fabulous at painting middle-aged men may not be good with young children. In my experience, it is the artists who have raised children themselves who deliver the most sympathetic portraits."

Laura Rolfes is a Cincinnati-based collector who has commissioned numerous paintings of her three children over the course of their youth. She enjoys the working processes of portraiture, even the 12 hours of modeling that were required for artist Ken McCarty to make a portrait

SIMONE BINGEMER (b. 1953)

ISABELL

2005, PASTEL ON PAPER, 18 1/3 X 14 2/5 IN.
PRIVATE COLLECTION

of her entire family. Rolfes recommends that patrons be open to an artist's creative vision and the collaboration that portraiture inevitably requires. "I think that, over time, I have gained appreciation for how the portraits I've commissioned represent each artist's view of my children. I have gone beyond looking at them as images of my children and now see them as fantastic works of art." ■

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Editor's Note: Works by 49 finalists in the National Portrait Gallery's second *Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition* are on view through August 22, 2010. These finalists include Laura Chasman of Roslindale, MA, and David Eichenberg of Toledo, whose works are illustrated here. The NPG jury reviewed a staggering 3,300 entries (in media ranging from digital animation to sculpture) submitted by artists working in the U.S. and created in or after 2007. Named for the late NPG volunteer Virginia Outwin Boochever (1920-2005), the competition features a People's Choice Award that will be announced on January 24. Until then, everyone can enjoy the exhibition online and cast a vote for their favorite portrait. Also on view through July 5 is the fifth edition of NPG's *Portraiture Now* exhibition series: This year the painters Rose Frantzen, Jim Torok, and Rebecca Westcott explore the idea of community through a series of related portraits of friends, townspeople, and families.

Information: National Portrait Gallery, Eighth and F Streets NW, Washington, DC 20001, 202.633.1000, npg.si.edu

