



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Lilly Martin Spencer's Images of Children, 1845–1870

Laura Groves Napolitano

Sara Roby Predoctoral Fellow in Twentieth-Century American Realism
University of Maryland

In genre painter Lilly Martin Spencer's lifetime (1822–1902), the concepts of childhood and child rearing changed not once but twice for middle-class Northeastern parents. In the 1830s, as the ideas of eighteenth-century philosophers John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau became more widely accepted in the United States, parents started to view their children as unformed clay ready to be molded, as innately innocent rather than depraved. Still, absolute obedience and moral uprightness were expected from children as young as one year. By the 1870s, however, child-rearing ideologies called for parents to be more indulgent. Parents were to encourage children to follow their whims and cultivate their imaginations.

My dissertation examines Spencer's images of white, urban, middle-class children at this critical juncture when child-rearing concepts were evolving for a second time in nineteenth-century America. In these images, which Spencer produced in New York and Newark, New Jersey, during the most lauded period of her career, a nuanced outlook can be found that sometimes supports and oftentimes rejects antebellum societal ideals about childhood and child rearing. An analysis of Spencer's works reveals the ambivalences felt by parents during this time, equivocalities that are not reflected in the era's prolific advice manuals or prescriptive children's literature.

In four theme-based chapters, I explore the different ways in which Spencer both accepted and challenged the status quo with her images of children. The first chapter considers Spencer's reflections on the widespread experience of infant and child mortality. The second looks at her depictions of fathers' and grandfathers' interactions with children at a time when men's participation in child rearing was at a perceived low. The third investigates Spencer's portrayals of mischievous children as a reaction to the social problem of the urban poor. The fourth explores the artist's use of children in her paintings to cope with the effects of the Civil War. The study ends with an interpretation of Spencer's self-proclaimed masterpiece, *Truth Unveiling Falsehood* (1869, now lost), which can be read as an ambitious summation of her society's views on child rearing during this period.