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Art Critics in the Cradle: Fin-de-Siècle Painting Books and the Move to Modernism

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Children's Literature

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 43, 2015

pp. 161-181

10.1353/chl.2015.0011

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

Abstract

This paper argues early British painting books are important threshold texts. In content and form, they bridge artistic movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—from Pre-Raphaelitism to modernism—and demonstrate a shift in constructions of child artists—from ideas of the young as artists-in-training to modernist paradigms of the “innocent eye.”

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The author of "Art in the Nursery," published in 1883 in *The Magazine of Art*, dismisses early nineteenth-century children's book illustrations, especially those published by Oliver Goklsmith and John Newbery, as "smudgy abominations," "grotesque ineptitudes," and "hideous libels upon man and art and nature." It is the toxic influence of such art on children, the author suggests, that produced the "pitiful imbecility of the British School during the Dark Ages of British Art—the years, that is to say, immediately preceding the action of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood" (128). The author applauds instead the work of more modern artists for children, in particular printer Edmund Evans's famous triumvirate: Randolph Caldecott, Kate Greenaway, and Walter Crane. With such treasures available, the child "may be said to be something of an art-critic ere he leaves his cradle, and an adept in style ere he sees fit to abandon long garments for short, and the passive pleasure of the bottle for the activity of the spoon. It is his own fault if he be not; for his aesthetic opportunities are innumerable, and the matter produced for the gratification of his pampered appetite is perhaps the daintiest ever seen" (128). Children of the mid- to late-nineteenth century are poised to become the artists and tastemakers of their age, this author contends, because they are surrounded by the pictures of Caldecott, Greenaway, Crane, and other notables, including John Tenniel, Gustave Doré, and George Cruikshank—the "Millais and Leightons and Tademas" of the nursery (129).

Scholars of both children's literature and design have pointed toward such commentary as evidence of the cross-pollination between children's literature and larger aesthetic movements in the Victorian period. For example, historian Mark Girouard reads nineteenth-century illustrated children's books alongside other decorative and design arts, including architecture, furniture, and even gardens. He interprets the lush books illustrated by Caldecott, Crane, and Greenaway as "secret persuaders"—texts that dedicated aesthetes purchased as "a means of conditioning their children" into the Queen Anne styles popular in mid-Victorian homes (139). In a similar vein, Anne Lundin usefully reads reviews like "Art in the Nursery" as evidence of "a progressive



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Art Critics in the Cradle: Fin-de-Siècle Painting Books and the Move to Modernism, following mechanical logic, the Bahrain city makes the Foucault pendulum.

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