

# MoMA and Child: The Century of the Child at the Museum of Modern Art

by Ellen Handler Spitz

*The Century of the Child: Growing by Design 1900-2000* at the Museum of Modern Art

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11 West 53rd Street, between Fifth and Sixth avenues

New York City, [www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org)

Arriving expectantly at the sixth floor atrium of MOMA, prodded by a mad crush of child-loving visitors of all ages and nationalities, you are met by the blow-up of an original gelatin silver print (*Boy on Wall, Hammarkullen* by Jens S. Jensen, 1973). From a massive face of concrete blocks a child dangles, eerily hanging by his right arm, more than a body's height above the ground. Is it a boy or a girl? The figure wears a leather jacket, or possibly that's a quilted fabric, hard to tell, and the frowzy blond Christopher Robin haircut might signal either gender. What about the smile? Not an exhibitionistic grin, as in "Hey, everybody! Look what I can do!" Just a glance, acknowledging your arrival: "Oh, it's you," as if being suspended by one hand high above the earth were the most natural way in the world to greet someone. No bravado, no fear of falling. The perplexities of this uncanny image epitomize the show. As you stare at it, you experience dysphoria, weightlessness, a fleeting sense of levitation, and you may even recoup your own childhood wish to float above the ground. For the boy (*it is*, we read, a boy, named Michael, aged nine) actually seems to be suspended in front of the wall, not securely attached to it. Is this an illusion, or not?

What, this image makes you wonder, will this exhibit on *The Century of the Child* have to do with flesh and blood children, *pace* its title? Who or what is *the child*? What does it mean to design for *the child*? What are the ethics of such an enterprise? Presuming overall a rather bland and benign notion of childhood (think of Locke's *tabula rasa*), the show withdraws for the most part from messy engagements with actual children. Children float suspended and detached from what is presented: like the figure in the Swedish photograph, the work on view in these MOMA galleries bypasses emotion (with some notable exceptions, including film footage related to the 1940s work of Bauhaus-trained designer Friedl Dicker-Brandeis with children in the Terezín concentration camp near Prague, and Polish director Andrzej Wolski's 2011 film, *Toys*, that features Warsaw children scrounging in the rubble after World War II). Much of the intense passion, however—the felt crises, anxieties, puzzlements, riotous humor, and delirious joys—that characterize living children both mentally and behaviorally has gone missing. The distance off the ground, so to speak, can be disconcerting.

Indeed, what this ample, richly crowded, and perhaps unintentionally provocative seven-room exhibition reveals—in spite of itself—is a thoroughgoing exposé, decade after decade, of nearly unbroken top-down efforts to use, exploit, and control as well as engage children, sometimes by imitating them, occasionally by mocking them, all the while subsuming them under whatever artistic style, political agenda, or commercial opportunity happens to be ascendant. No major effort has been taken by the otherwise remarkably diligent curators to do more than show this. How have

the successive waves of stylized objects on display—toys, furniture, books, clothing, as well as imagery, shifting educational practices, and spatial arrangements actually impacted the children exposed to them? A visitor seeks in vain for critique and evaluation—for any report on the later effects of all this adult-perpetrated design on youth. Few questions are aired. A typical text panel reads: “In such rooms, it was felt, children’s spontaneity and pleasure in learning would flourish.” But *why* was that felt? And by *whom*? And was this feeling ever put to a test?

Walking from room to room, you are struck by the way the putative child, objectified despite protestations to the contrary, has been incorporated into period style, the vector being culture > child, not the reverse: the Arts & Crafts Movement, Art Nouveau, Expressionism, Futurism, De Stijl, Pop Art, digital art. Despite claims that artists’ approaches were rooted in desires to understand children, you may come away feeling that, if the twentieth century is indeed *The Century of the Child*, surely that child is as much a projection of adult fantasy and social ideology as the pale coy innocents of the pre-Raphaelites or the bedizened seventeenth century infantas of Velázquez.

A Gargantuan wooden table with a climbable oversized chair and step stool offer adults who try them out a bodily take on children’s experience. Mugging visitors pose on them for photo ops, while uniformed security personnel control access by ordering people brusquely to form a queue. For one split second, I clamber up on the chair and, when the tabletop reaches barely to my nose, my bygone helplessness and marginalization as a child rush back in a flood: I am Gulliver in Brobdingnag until an officious guard whisks me away: “You can’t spend any time here,” he admonishes sternly; now, I truly am a child.

Visitors chuckle and guffaw at wall-mounted black and white 1927 footage of a three or four-year-old who steers his kiddie-motor wheel of fanciful circular design along an empty road. His father, in fedora, tie, and three-piece suit, chases him dutifully, unable to keep up as the child and his mini-vehicle careen along a wide unpopulated avenue in zigzag swaths, as if illustrating the line from Isaiah 11 (“the little child shall lead them”) or Wordsworth’s similar sentiment from the *Rainbow* poem of 1802. Throughout the exhibit, which is thronged morning and afternoon, spectators seem euphoric, entranced by images such as this. They appear bemused and nostalgic, while their children respond especially to movement for, as Fénelon wisely wrote, children are happiest when their bodies are in motion, when they can change position.

Late in the show, you come upon a striking work that chimes with the Jensen photograph you met at the start: Paul Rand, in 1996, shortly before his death, composes a flat black child, upside down, arms akimbo, balancing precariously on a slanting tightrope made of words. The great designer fills in the body with saucy details from Breughel’s *Children’s Games* (1560) to create an indelible poster in support of a village devoted to orphaned and abandoned children.

Aesthetically, top prize belongs to *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, an exquisite dreamlike shadow film by Berlin artist Lotte Reiniger (1923-25) that plays silently in a gallery labeled “Avant Garde Play Time.” Possibly the earliest surviving animated film, this gossamer confection was painstakingly made by hand, its style inspired by finger puppets, embroidery, and lace making. Reiniger, who invented her own techniques, created this masterpiece by scissor work, intricately cutting out characters of astonishingly delicate beauty, which, in an evanescent world, sway,

prance, bow, and embrace while enacting stories of intrigue, romance, and suspense drawn from the *Arabian Nights*. Reiniger's villain, a wicked enchanter known as the African Magician, appears maleficently in *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp*. To stand spellbound watching as these silhouetted tales unfurl their sinister plots and metamorphoses in ever-swirling motion until Prince Achmed is at last reunited with his slender fairy Peri Banou, is to recapture a childhood in which magic is real and flying demons are more true than anything attached to solid earth.

This thought returns us to the elevated image with which we began — the photographed child in the air— and leads me to conclude that, if real children are to be found in this show, they must be summoned, like genii, from encounters with whatever designed objects move us most, for there is, after all, no such thing as *the child* but rather millions of uniquely responsive children, and adults, for whom childhood, despite varying degrees of distance, can still be occasionally invoked. Perhaps that is as close as we will ever come to the angel with the flaming sword who guards the way back, as Ernst Gombrich wrote famously once in his essay on the hobby horse.