

IDYLLIC CHILDHOOD OR IDLE GIRLS: WILLIAM BOUGUEREAU AND THE
KNOWING PEASANT CHILD

By

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To my wife

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My aim in this thesis is to read William Bouguereau's images of young peasant girls in light of the emerging social concerns about the loss or corruption of childhood innocence in rural and working-class communities at the time. I argue that although Bouguereau's female peasant paintings often promote the conservative, idealized view of childhood and peasantry still prevalent in France during the last half of the nineteenth century, a handful of Bouguereau's later images of young beggars, knitters, and shepherdesses reflect the growing concern in Europe over the loss of childhood innocence. These paintings specifically address an emerging preoccupation with the general welfare of rural and working-class children brought about by changing roles of and attitudes towards childhood in late-nineteenth-century France. While the majority of girls represented in his paintings are depicted as socially and sexually innocent, many of his later images illustrate an increased tendency to represent these idealized figures as being aware of their own socio-sexual place in society.

The inclusion of pensive, knowing girls in Bouguereau's idealized paintings undermines the "blank slate" innocence heralded by traditional views of childhood. How we can assume that these girls "know" (that is, how we can perceive they are aware of their own socio-sexual subject position) is by the nature of their retuned gazes, which suggests that these young girls

acknowledge their own existence in relation to a viewer. This awareness undercuts a crucial part of the picturesque peasant child ideal: a child's separation from adult society. The increasing number of Bouguereau's paintings that include knowing girls within supposedly idyllic settings in many ways mirrors society's increasing awareness of the myth of childhood innocence and ingenuous rural living—a myth that is revealed by bourgeois society's increasing concerns with the exploitation of children within urban centers and the French countryside that were taking shape during the last decades of the century. While Bouguereau's work exemplifies the conservative movement of art and elite society, even his own idealized style of art—one that sought to uphold the most conservative views of childhood—began to show signs of its own unraveling due to social realities that could not be ignored.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Few present day artists have depicted childhood with more tenderness, charm, and wit than Bouguereau. In order to express the naïveté [sic], mischief, smiles and caresses of those darling little ones, to paint their pink and white flesh, their wavy locks, their attitudes and gestures, so simple, so ingenuous, so graceful, he has been able to fashion the most pleasant, picturesque and original scenes with inexhaustible diversity . . . In his treatment of these subjects the painter always shows delicacy and restraint; he never lets there be any suspicion of an even thinly veiled licentious or sensual tension.¹

-Marius Vachon, *W. Bouguereau*, 1900

In writing of William Bouguereau's paintings of peasant girls, Marius Vachon, the artist's first biographer, insists that the work of this French academic painter during the last half of the nineteenth century promoted traditional views of children and ideas about childhood. In effect, like many other conservative artists of his time, Bouguereau sought to equate childhood to innocence and "naturalness," as if children were somehow closer to nature and therefore more innocent than adults. Having painted more images of rustic girls and female adolescents than of any other group or theme, an overwhelming portion of the artistic oeuvre of William Bouguereau is comprised of scenes of carefree girls in idyllic pastoral settings. As Vachon explains, these rural children were thought to possess a "simple" and "ingenuous" character, a temperament directly associated with not only children, but peasants as well. The peasant, much like the child, was believed to live an innocent life due to his or her marginal position on the periphery of bourgeois society,² and the maintenance of this ideal is one that has hitherto been unquestioned in Bouguereau's works.

Such idyllic scenes of rural childhood can be seen in a painting done during the last years of his life appropriately titled *Idylle enfantine* (1900; Figure 1). Here, Bouguereau renders a

¹ Marius Vachon, *W. Bouguereau* (Paris: A. Lahure, 1900), 89-92.

² Fronia E. Wissman, *Bouguereau* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 1996), 46.

scene of tranquil childhood in its most idealized form. The viewer witnesses a scene containing two young girls alone in the countryside. The older of the two plays a tune for her companion on her wooden pipe as she and her comrade sit within a field of wild grasses. Her younger friend, possibly her sister, rests her right elbow on her elder's right knee as she listens to the simple melody. These two girls seem to embody traditional views of childhood. Unaware of adult life and its struggles, these girls innocently go about their childhood lives by occupying themselves with a simple, entertaining task to pass the time. In a move that is characteristic in many of his peasant paintings, Bouguereau takes the conventional theme of an innocent, carefree, and natural childhood quite literally by actually placing the girls in a rural, "natural" setting. Rendered alone without any sign of chaperones, these young peasant girls exist in a separate realm all their own, a natural world of childhood that is devoid of adult presence and adult interaction.

In many ways, *Idylle enfantine* can be seen as an illustration of the view of childhood championed by Bouguereau and many of his contemporaries; however, the harsh realities to which many rural and working-class children were subjected for labor reasons, in addition to growing concerns about these realities within bourgeois society, undermine this idealized view of childhood innocence. In his recent writings on children, Henry Jenkins, an American scholar whose work explores the history of the idea of childhood innocence, helps to define the parameters by which western society has typically distinguished childhood from adulthood, and accordingly, innocence from corruption as in the nineteenth century:

Our culture imagines childhood as a utopian space, separate from adult cares and worries, free from sexuality, outside social division, closer to nature and the primitive world, more fluid in its identity and its access to the realms of imagination, beyond historical change, more just, pure, and innocent and in the end, waiting to be corrupted or protected by adults.³

³ Henry Jenkins, *The Children's Culture Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 3-4.

He also points out that for centuries, children have been thought of as sexless beings living within their own innocent world, ignorant of the world of adults. Importantly, while the child has been understood as having its own self-contained existence, this existence is one that is free from, but also potentially corrupted by, the lives and actions of adults.

My aim in this thesis is to read Bouguereau's images of young peasant girls in light of the emerging social concerns about the loss or corruption of childhood innocence in rural and working-class communities at the time. We can see this anxiety over the possibility of corruption even in Vachon's largely saccharine views of childhood in his biography of Bouguereau. To be sure, while Vachon takes care to highlight the "ingenuousness" of Bouguereau's subjects, his commentary begs the question of why such careful attention to their innocence is even necessary. Indeed, a paradox seems to emerge: if the world of children—especially rustic children—was in fact equated with a world of innocence and simplicity, then why does Vachon feel obligated to remark explicitly on the lack of "licentious or sensual tension" in the painting? By Vachon's logic, we are left to question if childhood and peasantry were less synonymous with innocence than many of the visual and literary works of the period lead one to believe. While Bouguereau continued to paint images of idealized peasants during the last decades of the century, concerns began to be voiced about the potential loss of corruption of childhood innocence if the nation's underprivileged youth was not properly sheltered from the ills of adult society. While well-to-do families generally kept their children close, sheltering them from the public realm by attending to their needs within the domestic sphere, those families who lacked the necessary funds to educate their children within the home were often forced to send their offspring out into the world to work. Although "peasant" children were thought to be especially innocent due to their double disconnectedness from society (as both peasants and

children), these rural and working-class children actually posed the largest threat to the ideal of childhood innocence.

I argue that although Bouguereau's female peasant paintings often promote the conservative, idealized view of childhood and peasantry still prevalent in France during the last half of the nineteenth century, a handful of Bouguereau's later images of young beggars, knitters, and shepherdesses reflect the growing concern in Europe over the loss of childhood innocence. These paintings specifically address an emerging preoccupation with the general welfare of rural and working-class children brought about by changing roles of and attitudes towards childhood in late-nineteenth-century France. Bouguereau placed his idealized peasants outdoors in agrarian landscapes, carefully rendering their unsullied clothing and immaculate, shoeless feet. However, while the majority of girls represented in these paintings are depicted as socially and sexually innocent, many of his later images illustrate an increased tendency to represent these idealized figures as being aware of their own social, sexual, and/or physical position within society. Such a view of corrupted innocence can be seen in his *The Broken Pitcher* (1891; Figure 2). Unlike his depictions of the girls in *Idylle enfantine*, Bouguereau portrays a young peasant girl with a knowing face. Understood by contemporary viewers and modern scholars alike as an image of lost virginity, the girl's pensive appearance is meant to symbolize her experience of the loss of childhood innocence. During 1880s and 1890s, Bouguereau began to depict many of his underprivileged girls with pensive appearances rather than the carefree faces typically seen in his earlier works.

I have chosen to focus this analysis on Bouguereau's images of young, peasant girls not only because they make up the large majority of his oeuvre, but also because these paintings highlight the overwhelming desire of upper- and middle-class adults to commission works in

which the notions of the ideal little girl and the idyllic life of rural French citizens converge. I show that the inclusion of pensive, “knowing” girls in Bouguereau’s “idealized” paintings undermines the “blank slate” innocence heralded by traditional views of childhood. How we can assume that these girls “know” (that is, how we can perceive they are aware of their own socio-sexual subject position) is by the nature of their retuned gazes, which suggests that these young girls acknowledge their own existence in relation to a viewer. This awareness undercuts a crucial part of the picturesque peasant child ideal: a child’s separation from adult society. The increasing number of Bouguereau’s paintings that include knowing girls within supposedly idyllic settings in many ways mirrors society’s increasing awareness of the myth of childhood innocence and ingenuous rural living—a myth that is revealed by bourgeois society’s increasing concerns with the exploitation of children within urban centers and the French countryside that were taking shape during the last decades of the century. While Bouguereau’s work exemplifies the conservative movement of art and elite society, even his own idealized style of art—one that sought to uphold the most conservative views of childhood—began to show signs of its own unraveling due to social realities that could not be ignored.

CHAPTER 2 CONSTRUCTING CHILDHOOD INNOCENCE

Vachon's confidence in Bouguereau's preservation of traditional concepts that deal with the idealized view of childhood innocence illustrates the lasting impression the Enlightenment thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his influential ideals about childhood had on late nineteenth-century society as well as society's need to separate the child from the realm of adults. Prior to Rousseau, western cultures saw childhood as "simply a brief phase of dependency passed over quickly and bearing little special importance."⁴ Childhood was in no way directly related to innocence as children were recognized primarily as little adults. Jenkins does well to explain in his text that although childhood began to be understood as a separate stage of life from adulthood prior to the eighteenth century, it was not typically associated with innocence. Parents sought to protect their children from natural threats alone as adults thought it highly unlikely for children to be "corrupted by adult knowledge."⁵ It wasn't until the Enlightenment that children began to be appreciated and even envied for their blissful ignorance of the cares of adult society.

The nineteenth century's view of childhood as an age of innocence owes much to Rousseau's influential texts on childhood. For Rousseau, the child represented the antithesis of corrupt adult life in that children, unlike adults, were believed to be free from "social convention and utilitarian calculation" and adulthood was the result of corrupted childhood innocence.⁶ Children were thought to be in their own separate category, one that centered on the child's closeness to nature rather than society. In one of his short writings, *On Reasoning with Children*, Rousseau emphasizes the importance of nature in the development of children:

⁴ Henry Jenkins, *The Children's Culture Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 15.

⁵ Henry Jenkins, *The Children's Culture Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 16.

⁶ Henry Jenkins, *The Children's Culture Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 18.

Nature intends that children shall be children before they are men. If we insist on reversing this order we shall have fruit early indeed, but unripe and tasteless and liable to early decay . . . Childhood has its own methods of seeing, thinking, and feeling. Nothing shows less than to try to substitute our own methods for these.⁷

As the passage attests, Rousseau was adamant that children must grow up in their own time.

Much like young flowers, children were meant to bloom when nature saw fit. Most importantly, Rousseau remained critical of formal education for children, as he believed this type of instruction would hinder a child's natural development.⁸ The following lines published in *Émile* highlights his distaste for early childhood education:

The mind should be left undisturbed till its faculties have developed . . . Therefore education of the earliest years should be merely negative. It consists, not in teaching virtue or truth, but in preserving the heart from vice and from the spirit of error . . . Exercise his body, his limbs, his senses, his strength but keep his mind idle as long as you can . . . Leave childhood to ripen in your children.⁹

Rousseau's emphasis on the susceptibility of a child's mind to outside influences helped shape nineteenth-century ideas about childhood innocence. While his commentary imagines the ripening of childhood as a distinctly male experience, as the century progressed, a greater emphasis would be placed on the importance of formal education for both sexes, especially girls, as education came to be seen as a force for progress.¹⁰

Departing from Rousseau's logic, nineteenth-century France began to see formal education as a key factor in the promotion of childhood obedience. However, this mindset only applied to rural and urban unprivileged children, as the bourgeois child was thought to be better

⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "On Reasoning with Children," in *The Portable Age of Reason Reader*, ed. Crane Brinton, (New York: Viking, 1956), 122.

⁸ Henry Jenkins, *The Children's Culture Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 18.

⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile*, trans. Barbara Foxley (New York: Dutton, 1963), 57-58.

¹⁰ See Rachel Fuchs, *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and the Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France* (Albany: State U. of New York, 1984), 53-54.

taught at home in an informal setting. It was the unruly children of the lower classes that threatened the myth childhood innocence that those distinguished members of society were so unhesitant to believe in, not those brought up in distinguished households who naturally conformed to rules and regulations of society by their imitation of adult etiquette and manners. Bourgeois society's insistence on educating children of the laboring classes exemplifies a paradox of childhood plaguing late nineteenth-century society: how can a "disciplined" child be "free" from society? Philippe Ariès, a historian of childhood, writes of this contradiction in his book *Centuries of Childhood*:

The idea of childhood innocence resulted in two kinds of attitude and behavior towards childhood: firstly, safeguarding it against pollution by life and particularly by the sexuality tolerated if not approved of among adults; and secondly, strengthening it by developing character and reason. We may see to contradiction here, for on the one hand childhood is preserved and on the other hand it is made older than its years.¹¹

Expanding on Ariès comment, childhood is preserved if the child remains sheltered from society; however, all too often, adults rushed to preserve childhood innocence rather than letting it mature in its own time. Using education to combat childhood delinquency was a practice that indirectly undermined the idealized view of childhood as an age of innocence—a marginal existence free from adult society and its problems.

Painting a Myth: Explaining Terminology

Prior to Rousseau's publication of *Émile* in 1762, child portraiture seemed to follow public perceptions about children in that child sitters often resembled smaller version of their parents, as they were often dressed like adults. This eighteenth-century view of childhood quickly began to change due to Rousseau's notion of childhood as a phase of life unique from

¹¹ Phillippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Vintage, 1962), 119.

adulthood. His new ideas about the nature of childhood began to be expressed pictorially through the visual arts during the last decades of the eighteenth century. Early visual examples of Rousseau's new version of childhood first came in the form of child portraits that tended to depict the child alone or disconnected from his or her parent. The idea of connecting childhood innocence to nature began to permeate English portraits before those done by the French. Portrait painting in eighteenth-century England assumed a more informal nature than those found throughout other European countries.¹² Eighteenth-century paintings, such as Joshua Reynolds's famous *Age of Innocence*¹³ (1785 ?; Figure 3), offered a view of children that directly connected them with innocence and with nature. This natural child theme spread to the rest of Europe and images of innocent children disconnected from contemporary adult society replaced images of children portrayed as small adults. It is also important to note that Rousseau's influence on English portraiture must have been amplified by the fact that Rousseau himself lived in England from 1765 to 1767. The image of Reynolds's young, barefoot child rendered alone in the wilderness with no sign of any discernable thoughts or feelings would become a model for future artists all across Europe who sought to depict Rousseau's version of childhood.

The Romantic Child

Images of Rousseau's innocent child gained popularity during the second half of the eighteenth century. Seen by adults as models for all children (including their own), images of innocent children in nature gave credibility to Rousseau's version of childhood by visually

¹² J. A. Parks, "Naughty & Nice: Children's Portraits" *American Artist* 72 (February 2008): 50.

¹³ The painting's title, *The Age of Innocence*, was not invented by Joshua Reynolds. This title does not appear until 1794 when engravings of Reynolds's painting began to surface in England. For many years, it was thought that this painting was completed by Reynolds in 1788; however, the painting has strikingly similar qualities with a work entitled *The Little Girl* that Reynolds painted for the Royal Academy in 1785. See Tate Collection: British art and international modern and contemporary art, "Sir Joshua Reynolds: The Age of Innocence, ?1788," The Tate Online, <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=12395&tabview=text>.

posting the child's separation from adult society. By the turn of the nineteenth century, innocence and purity became qualities that all children—both boys and girls—were naturally thought to possess; however, while young boys were able to grow up to be men, the ideal woman, despite her eventual coming of age, could never really grow up as she was seen as intellectually equivalent to a child.¹⁴ As Catherine Robson explains, “the ideal little girl of the nineteenth century could trace her lineage back to the concepts of childhood developed on the one hand by Rousseau . . . and on the other, by the strains of evangelically influenced Christianity that rejected Calvinistic notions of original sin.”¹⁵ Both French and English ideas together created a idealized view of childhood that was free from original sin. The innocent child was thought of as the good child, one that is “so invitingly vacant that goodness is utter blankness. Such blankness can suggest the child's goodness.”¹⁶

The thoughtless, innocent child that artists promoting Rousseau's ideal began to produce is a figure Anne Higonnet calls the “Romantic child.” She defines this individual as one that “makes a good show of having no class, no gender, and no thoughts—of being socially, sexually, and physically innocent.”¹⁷ Romantic children were seen as clean slates onto which adults projected their own ideals, however virtuous or licentious they might be. As Higonnet rightly explains in her text, the blankness so important to the Romantic child concept also theoretically

¹⁴ See Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siecle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 160-174.

¹⁵ Catherine Robson, *Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentlemen* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 157.

¹⁶ James R. Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 223.

¹⁷ Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (New York, N.Y.: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 24.

renders all children vulnerable to the harsh realities of society.¹⁸ While making reference to the influential work of James Kincaid on the history of childhood, Higonnet exposes the inherent problem with the natural innocence prescribed by the Romantic childhood theme:

Defined as the opposite of adult sexuality, childhood innocence, according to Kincaid, runs the danger of becoming alluringly opposite, enticingly off-limits. Innocence suggests violation. Innocence suggests whatever adults want to imagine.¹⁹

Higonnet's comment helps to explain why the Romantic child must be free from contemporary adult society in order to succeed in its function of showing what adult society is not. If childhood innocence can suggest violation, then the presence of adult interference must be eliminated from the picture in order to guarantee that natural innocence will not be lost and the idealized image of childhood remains uncorrupted.

This safeguarding of the Romantic child happens in three ways, the first two having already been addressed: 1) the child's ignorance of or the absence of an adult figure within the picture, 2) the child's absence of cognitive thought, and 3) the child's difference in costume when compared to adults. This last difference can be seen in the specialized costumes created for children during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While there was a great emphasis placed on distinguishing boy from man, little effort was made in distinguishing girl from woman. Young boy costumes were removed from those of adult men in both style and era, but it was certainly more difficult to discern young girls from grown women. More often than not, a young girl would be dressed in the same fashions as an adult woman, but an emphasis would be placed

¹⁸ See Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (New York, N.Y.: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 38.

¹⁹ James R. Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), cited in Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (New York, N.Y.: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 38.

on the size of the garments, as they would often be too big for the child to wear.²⁰ In many ways, the process of growing up for boys often entailed casting off their age-specific clothing to become men while girls seem simply to grow into their oversized clothing, and therefore appear to remain little girls forever.

The Knowing Child

Unlike the concept of Romantic childhood that presents a view of children as naturally unconscious of their own social and sexual position within society, the term “Knowing childhood” calls into question the social and sexual awareness of children. As Higonnet explains, “[u]nlike Romantic images [of childhood], Knowing images, for the first time in the history of art, endow children with psychological and physical individuality at the same time as they recognize them as being distinctively child-like.”²¹ Much like how adults know they are not innocent in relation to children, Knowing children “know” they are no longer innocent in that they have an unlawful knowledge of adult issues. These children still recognize that they are children, but children whose understanding of adulthood is diametrically opposed to their innocence. Higonnet emphasizes that twentieth-century [now twenty-first-century] viewers of these images are prone to be more uncomfortable with such images in that our contemporary society now vacillates between two opposing views of childhood: the Rousseauian *Age of Innocence* view of childhood, and a newer, more unsettling view of childhood that exploits the exceptions to the Romantic child ideal and thus presents a view of childhood that is less than pristine. Although the concept of the Knowing child has been typically applied to photographs

²⁰ Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (New York, N.Y.: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 28. Also see Phillippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Vintage, 1962), 61.

²¹ See Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (New York, N.Y.: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 12.

of children, such as Carl Dodgson's (Lewis Carroll's) many images of prepubescent girls, I intent to show that examples of Knowing children can be seen in some of Bouguereau's images of young peasant girls produced during the 1880s and 1890s that call attention to contemporary social issues taking place in the lives of late nineteenth-century rural and working-class children.

Forfeiting Children's Social Innocence: The Labor Problem

Recent scholarship has begun to explore the physical appearance of some of Bouguereau's idealized peasant children. In 1980, Hollister Sturges began to interpret these girls' appearances as erotic expressions hidden behind a veil of excessive idealism. Sturges's reading of their appearance is based on what he perceives as their sexual awareness. He highlights that in some of Bouguereau's works, "his maidens' intense, brooding stares, states of preoccupation, and partial nudity suggest their sexual awareness as well as that of the artist."²² Sturges is right to point out these intense brooding stares of Bouguereau's young peasant girls as a symbol of sexual awareness, and certainly their cognizance of their own appearance before the viewer would seem to make them examples of Higonnet's Knowing children. But, while Sturges's argument offers an important sexual dimension to these girls' awareness, I want to suggest that there is more to Bouguereau's paintings than mere erotic appeal. The exploitation of children for labor purposes, which made an undeniable contribution to the loss of their "social innocence" (a term I shall use to describe a loss of innocence due to either sexual or physical exploitation), must also be considered in the works Bouguereau completed during the last decades of the century.

Scholars such as Anna Green, who focus on similar images of children but within urban settings, can shed light on the representations of peasant children as well. Author of the recently

²² Hollister Sturges, *Angels and Urchins: Images of Children at the Joslyn* (Omaha: Joslyn Art Museum, 1980), 57.

published book *French Paintings of Childhood and Adolescence, 1848-1886*, Green believes that the creation of many childhood images produced during the latter half of the century should be attributed to a multitude of France's social concerns, including, but not limited to, the sexual identities of the children during the July Monarchy and Third Republic. Green points out that the last three decades of the century witnessed an increased attention to France's children that was far greater than any previous generation had encountered, and she argues that images of urban children either working in factories or performing/begging in city streets were records of increasing social concern about child welfare. Although her central focus is French metropolitan youth, Green's images, especially her post-Franco-Prussian war images that deal with childhood, can be useful in thinking about Bouguereau's scenes of careworn peasant girls, which date from the two decades following the 1870 war. Bouguereau's post-1870s female peasant imagery ought to be read within the context of the lost social innocence of working-class youth (primarily due to sexual and labor-related exploitation) and how a child's own acknowledgement of and concern with this loss challenges the traditional view of the Romantic child that continued to prevail in artwork of the period.

In her book, Green does address a few paintings by Bouguereau, such as his *Indigent Family* (Charity) of 1865 (Figure 4). Her analysis of this painting of an impoverished mother and her three children begging for alms at the base of a column offers insight into Bouguereau's sentiments towards those individuals less fortunate than himself. Green highlights that the poster at the top right of the painting makes reference to a sermon on charity given by Père Lacordaire—an inspiring speaker whom Bouguereau had probably heard sometime during his life—and is proof of Bouguereau's genuine concern for the impoverished people of his nation. She suggests that “[i]t might be argued, then, that Bouguereau effects an admirable balance: his

seamless *fini*²³ suggests real flesh and blood at the same time as his classicizing renders his paintings timeless.”²⁴ I find that the balancing of lifelike and timeless looking subjects can also be seen in many of his paintings of rural girls. This vacillation between timelessness and temporality also mirrors Sturges’ observations that many of Bouguereau’s works suffer from “a certain ambivalence, from conflicting impulses that simultaneously hint at and repudiate the erotic nature of his peasant girls.”²⁵ In the same way that Bouguereau cannot directly depict sex in his paintings (even if he does address the issue of sexuality), neither can he explicitly depict problems with child labor. This of course is why we get broken pitchers in lieu of sex acts and peasants with a healthy glow.

While Green’s observations of Bouguereau’s *Indigent Family* offers one reading of this painting and of Bouguereau’s general feelings towards the poor, John House’s article titled “Pompier Politics: Bouguereau’s Art” offers additional information regarding Bouguereau’s overall conservative view of charity and the Bourgeois’s place in securing the poor’s position in life. House emphasizes that while the poster tacked to the wall of Bouguereau’s classical building does reference Lacordaire’s plea for the poor, its appearance is crucial in that it seeks to reinforce the conservative action of voluntary charity of individuals, as it was seen as one of the primary tools in the maintaining social order and hierarchies.²⁶ He explains that “[t]he poor in Bouguereau’s work literally know their place. Clean, handsome and arranged in an impeccably

²³ See Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner, *Romanticism and Realism: The Mythology of Nineteenth-Century Art* (New York: Viking Press, 1984) 224.

²⁴ Anna Green, *French Paintings of Childhood and Adolescence, 1848-1886* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007), 54.

²⁵ Hollister Sturges, *Angels and Urchins: Images of Children at the Joslyn* (Omaha: Joslyn Art Museum, 1980), 57.

²⁶ John House, “Pompier Politics: Bouguereau’s Art.” *Art in America* 72 (1984): 144.

tidy pyramid, an indigent family begs for alms under the church's charitable wing."²⁷ In trying to express values that maintained social hierarchies, Bouguereau—even as the cornerstone of a conservative artistic élite—complicates the issue of childhood and innocence in that if these children are indeed “knowing” they know their intractable place in society. House argues that Bouguereau instills certain distancing devices in his work that “prevent the viewer from engaging in a direct psychological relationship as equal to equal, with the figures depicted.”²⁸ It is true that the bourgeois viewers of these works are meant see these figures as picturesque outsiders, mythic simpletons, but nevertheless, still as *individuals* of some indiscernible lower class who know their own place. In effect, if these girls do in fact know their place within a society delineated by a hierarchical class stratification, then these knowing children of the impoverished classes are the byproduct of corrupted childhood innocence.

²⁷ John House, “Pompier Politics: Bouguereau's Art.” *Art in America* 72 (1984): 144.

²⁸ John House, “Pompier Politics: Bouguereau's Art.” *Art in America* 72 (1984): 143.

CHAPTER 3 BOUGUEREAU'S PEASANTS AND THE LOSS OF CHILDHOOD INNOCENCE

In 1891, Bouguereau completed one of his most famous peasant genre scenes called *The Broken Pitcher*. For this painting, Bouguereau rendered an image of a prepubescent girl set in a pastoral landscape. The close, intimate view of this young girl makes it difficult for viewers to notice any other features of the work, as her body spans the entire length of the canvas. Her sullen face, especially her eyes, fights to be the central focus of the painting. These dark brown eyes are fixed in concentration outward towards the viewer, thus acknowledging her presence as the object of the viewer's gaze. Her lips seem to tremble, displaying a feeling of uneasiness, if not embarrassment. This sense of discomfort is emphasized by the rest of her body as she recoils from the surface of the canvas, and in effect, the viewer. To the left of the sitter's feet, the artist renders the broken pitcher the young girl has carried to the water pump, an object that might go unnoticed if it were not for the painting's title. Bouguereau makes no direct reference as to how or why the base of the vessel has cracked in two. For its contemporary audience, this broken pitcher was instantly legible as a direct reference to this young girl's loss of innocence, often conflated with the loss of virginity.²⁹

This type of sensual genre scene was far from foreign to a late nineteenth-century audience who would have been familiar with the painterly precedents set by the eighteenth-century genre painter's like Jean-Baptiste Greuze. One of the most popular painters of his time, Greuze spent a majority of his artistic career producing works that centered on the emerging sexuality of young demoiselles, dubbed "Greuze girls." While these images were seen as pictorial punch lines for eighteenth-century moral tales, they were extremely popular during the

²⁹ Hollister Sturges, *Angels and Urchins: Images of Children at the Joslyn* (Omaha: Joslyn Art Museum, 1980), 57. Also see Karin Calvert, *Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood, 1600-1900* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 150-152.

nineteenth century as well. Greuze's own version of a broken pitcher, *The Broken Pitcher* (1763; Figure 5), bears many similarities to its nineteenth-century counterpart, as they are both single figure compositions that focus on young female sitters. Bouguereau makes subtle changes to the theme, but the significance of Greuze's water pitcher remains unchanged in his work. Although both Bouguereau and Greuze's genre scenes deal with the theme of awakening sexuality in young ladies, there are important differences between them, one significant difference being the girls' ages.

While I agree with Sturges' comment that both Greuze and Bouguereau "evoke a sentimentality and thinly disguised sexuality" within these works, Bouguereau's young peasant barely crosses into the realm of adolescence,³⁰ as she appears to be a young girl of twelve or thirteen. Due to the noticeable difference in the age of Bouguereau's peasant girls when compared to his predecessor's young demoiselle, additional issues besides the awakening sexual desires of young women need to be taken into account. Greuze's eighteenth-century girl, much like the rest of the artist's "Greuze girls," is hardly a girl at all; rather she can easily be seen as a young woman. Her developed bosom and adult hips mark her as such. For the viewer of this image, this woman is in a position of discreet availability—a young woman who is available to be seen and possessed. Greuze emphasizes her availability in that he chooses to depict his young demoiselle as having no companion, no lover, no guardian. This young lady is also shown in the act of lifting up her skirt, acting as a form of striptease that in reality reveals nothing but remains suggestive in order to keep the viewer's interest. The slight curling of her fingers against her pelvis and the inclusion of flowers suggest her recent loss of virginity. In her text on abandoned

³⁰ Adolescence was a term constructed during the 1880s and 1890s by the middle classes to describe the last stage of childhood, starting from age fourteen until marriage. See Rachel Fuchs, *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and the Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France* (Albany: State U. of New York, 1984), 53.

children, Rachel Fuchs notes that the middle classes often worried about the adolescents of urban working classes.³¹ The lives led by these older children of the laboring classes often threatened the current social beliefs about childhood innocence and ignorance of adult society issues—especially sexuality. In *The Broken Pitcher*, Bouguereau's directs public concern not towards the country's adolescents, but to a prepubescent peasant child. Indeed, Sturges is correct in stating that "[s]exuality is not a theme Bouguereau can confront directly"³² not least of all because a direct sexual reference with a child of this age would have undermined the trope of childhood innocence.

Unlike Bouguereau's peasant who recoils from the viewer into a pose that suggests her distress, Greuze's young lady stands fully erect and frontal in the foreground of the painting. Her partially exposed breast—a trademark of the Greuze girl—highlights the lack of shame the subject has had in taking part in the sexual encounter. The young lady's face is perhaps the most telling portion of the painting. Unlike the beseeching eyes of Bouguereau's young peasant girl that directly address the viewer, Greuze's young woman stares off into the distance. Her gaze travels over the spectator's right shoulder. In contrast to the furrowed brow of Bouguereau's peasant, this worldly woman wears a more dreamy expression. Her relaxed eyes and slight smirk offer a view of a young lady who now knows of the physical pleasures taken from sexual activities and relishes in the memory. The appearance of Bouguereau's young peasant is clearly different. Instead of a carefree personality, this peasant looks as if she pines over her loss. As

³¹ Rachel Fuchs, *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and the Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France* (Albany: State U. of New York, 1984), 53.

³² Hollister Sturges, *Angels and Urchins: Images of Children at the Joslyn* (Omaha: Joslyn Art Museum, 1980), 57.

Henry Jenkins's explains, "[t]he innocent child wants nothing, desires nothing, and demands nothing—except, perhaps, its own innocence."³³

As a child who has lost her childhood innocence, Bouguereau's peasant certainly qualifies as one of Higonnet's "Knowing children." This knowingness is signaled by the sense of awareness displayed by the expression on the child's face, as well as her body language. As the viewer surveys the surface of the canvas, he or she cannot avoid focusing on the child's eyes, and she in return gazes back at the viewer. This returned gaze plays an important role as it connects the viewer to the forlorn child and, in turn, the child to the gazing viewer. Her returned gaze is a product of her knowing self. No longer innocent, she now acknowledges how she is viewed by the adult world, hence her cautious pose. Sturges argues that in this work, Bouguereau "communicates the hypocritical and inhibited attitudes towards sexuality that prevailed in his time,"³⁴ a message underscored by the young girl's age. Whether or not Bouguereau's image was designed to appeal to scopophilic desires of some male viewers remains a debatable issue. As Ronald Pearsall, author of *The Worm in the Bud*, explains, "[t]he motives of the child worshipers are ineluctably mixed. There was nostalgia for lost innocence; there was adult guilt at the mess they were making of the century, and children were seen as a hope for the future."³⁵ Regardless of the artist's intended message for French, English, and American audiences, it is clear that Bouguereau sought to create an emotional image of a young girl's loss of innocence that could speak to the sentiments of his viewers. By including a younger girl than Greuze does, Bouguereau work suggests that while some people might take

³³ See Henry Jenkins, *The Children's Culture Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 1-2.

³⁴ Hollister Sturges, *Angels and Urchins: Images of Children at the Joslyn* (Omaha: Joslyn Art Museum, 1980), 57-60.

³⁵ Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 359.

pleasure in looking as a ravished young girl, his painting can also be understood as a moral tale for its contemporary audience, one that illustrates Rousseau's message that "If we insist on reversing this order we shall have fruit early indeed, but unripe and tasteless and liable to early decay."

The knowing appearance of this young girl appears during a time in which increased concerns about the sanctity of childhood innocence continued to be voiced. The reinforcement of Rousseau's message continued throughout the second half of the nineteenth-century as illustrated by a comment made in the *Journal de la jeunesse* in 1852: "children's minds are like *tabulae rasae*. One should never write on them anything one might need to erase later."³⁶ Bouguereau's painted child longs to be innocent again, whereas Greuze's young lady revels in her knowing. Like Greuze, Bouguereau's reference to the girl's lost virginity was explicit in that the inclusion of props as coded symbols affirms the message for the viewer. As Sturges emphasizes in his text, there is "an inherent tension [that] resides in the theme of the young girl poised between childhood innocence and an emerging sensuality."³⁷ This sexual tension that Bouguereau's young peasant portrays must have been what Vachon's commentary was meant to absolve. His commentary must have served as a reaffirmation for himself and for his readers that while Bouguereau's representation of lost innocence was modeled after Greuze's work, he sought to acquit the artist of including any sensual tension between his young female peasant and the viewer, and specifically the artist. Regardless of the effectiveness of Vachon's statement in freeing Bouguereau's work from any illicit interpretations, his painting must have resonated

³⁶ Quoted in Alain Fourment, *Histoire de la presse, et des journaux d'enfants (1768-1988)* (Paris: Ecole, 1987), 57. Also see Anna Green, *French Paintings of Childhood and Adolescence, 1848-1886* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007), 224.

³⁷ Hollister Sturges, *Angels and Urchins: Images of Children at the Joslyn* (Omaha: Joslyn Art Museum, 1980), 57.

differently than Greuze's for a public with increasing concerns about safeguarding childhood innocence from the corruption of the adult world. Even disregarding the age of the sitter, when meeting the uncomfortable gaze of Bouguereau's young peasant, viewers of the work are invited to sympathize with this young victim's loss, more than they are offered an opportunity to revel in it.

Sexual Innocence as Social Innocence

For Third Republic France, the awakening sexuality of children and adolescents was one of the primary concerns expressed in elite bourgeois circles. This emerging sexuality, specifically in children of the underclasses, undercut traditional views of childhood as an age of innocence in which children are ignorant of the concerns and desires of adults. As I argue in the next section, the pensive expressions and returned gazes seen in a number of Bouguereau's depictions of peasant scenes during the 1880s and 1890s can be linked to children's increasing sexual awareness brought on by adult society's sexual exploitation of its youth—a concern illustrated by his famous *Broken Pitcher*—as well as increasing concerns with the Third Republic's failure to safeguard the innocence of underprivileged children through formal education. Unlike Rousseau, French society during the nineteenth century saw formal education as one of the leading ways to combat the awakening sexual desires of children, as well as a source of progress. The growing concern about children's sexual knowledge was part of a larger issue concerning the general loss of childhood innocence. We might better describe this loss of childhood innocence as the loss of social innocence: a child's innocence with respect to all aspects of adult life, such as sex, death, social status, and commerce. The young girl's loss of virginity in *The Broken Pitcher* must have been unsettling as it threatens two separate social categories—childhood and peasantry—as well as the inherent innocence associated with them.

As we shall see, when looking at other paintings that Bouguereau produced during the last three decades of the century, especially those completed during the 1880s and 1890s, there is a noticeable difference in the appearance of the young peasant girls from those peasants he painted prior to the 1870s such as his *Returning from Market* (Figure 6) done in 1869. These differences can even be seen in paintings dealing with the same subject matter, but that are completed at earlier point in the artist's career. With the emergence of the Third Republic, more and more attention would be given to the child's growing awareness of adult society. It was not until the establishment of the new government that France as a nation began to understand the complexity of the lives of rural improvised children, not just those living within the streets of Paris. Just as his previous examples of rural children were seen as polished and idealized versions of French rustics, Bouguereau's latter works continued to idealize his girl-children through the last decades of the century; however, the emergence of careworn faces and less than pristine appearances made their way into many of Bouguereau's images of shepherdesses, beggar children, and other picturesque outsiders, just as legislators fought to pass laws dealing with delinquency of rural and urban working-class boys and girls. Although Bouguereau continued to idealize his child subjects, this idealization is undermined by the returned gaze of these girls and their acknowledgement of the viewer. These young girls illustrate yet another paradox, one that begs the question: if Bouguereau's rustic girls are indeed idealized, and their idealism is contingent upon their ignorance of adult, urban society, then why does he choose to depict these peasants as knowing their place in a part of French society they are said to be ignorant of? No longer free from the cares of bourgeois society, these girls fully recognize their place in a system of social hierarchies, as well as their appeal to viewers in *appearing* to be innocent, simple, and close to nature.

Innocent Children, Innocent Paintings

Before looking at additional examples of Bouguereau's later works that illustrate this visual paradox, it is necessary to look at Bouguereau's earlier idealized representations of rural childhood. These earlier images best display the fanciful image of idealized peasantry the majority of the country chose to believe in. Peasants were seen as individuals on the outskirts of society, existing separately from both the world of the bourgeois and the urban worker. As Colin Heywood explains in his book *Childhood in Nineteenth-Century France*, "[t]he image proposed by the *bergeries*³⁸ was a seductive one: what, on the surface, could appear more idyllic than the society of young shepherds and shepherdesses, with its innocent diversions and closeness to nature?"³⁹ Their simple life and honest character was believed to be divorced from issues directly related to the middle class, and much like children, they needed to be protected from potential corruption. Such protection of peasant life can be seen in Bouguereau's earlier works that remove the peasant from a present-day context, and which in turn emphasize timeless innocence.

As early as 1855, Bouguereau began to paint numerous images of young, barefoot children within pastoral landscapes. Either gracing the shoulders of a father figure or being cradled in the arms of a mother, more often than not Bouguereau depicted these children in the company of their parents. One example of these early genre scenes that depicts peasant children with their families is his *Le retour des champs* (Return from the Fields) from 1860 (Figure 7).⁴⁰

³⁸ *Bergeries*: a farm, country estate, or other rural retreat maintained by a wealthy owner as a facility for rest and recreation.

³⁹ Colin Heywood, *Childhood in Nineteenth-Century France: Work, health and education among the 'classes populaires'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 49.

⁴⁰ Louise D'Argencourt, "Le retour des champs," in *William Bouguereau, 1825-1905*, ed. Louis d'Argencourt and Mark Steven Walker, (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1984), 160.

In this three figure composition (four including the sheep), the artist renders a mother and father strolling through the fields with their infant son. These peasants wear classicizing garments that help to remove them from a contemporary place and time thereby making this an image of ideal peasantry. The care-free life crucial to this idealized view of rural existence is emphasized by this peasant family's ability to complete daily tasks, such as harvesting grains and feeding farm animals while simultaneously raising and nurturing a young boy to become a successful member of a rural community.

This view of the peasant family working within the fields was also taken up by other artists who chose to depict the subject in a more realistic manner. An example of such a scene can be seen in Louis Pion's *Le Goûter* (Teatime) of 1891 (Figure 8). Although he worked primarily in Belgium, Pion's work mostly resembles images of peasantry done by French Naturalist artists working during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Pion's image offers a modernization of the theme seen in Bouguereau's *Le retour des champs*. Much like its predecessor, Pion's paintings show a peasant family at work in the fields; however, unlike the classicizing figures found in Bouguereau's work, these individuals are dressed in contemporary garments that connect them to contemporary society. Much like Bouguereau's painting, this image is idealized in that the figures are not shown struggling to complete manual labor; however, Pion's images seems to portray a more honest view of peasant life in that while these peasants are shown enjoying each other's company, the nurturing of a child cannot take place while simultaneously tending to work as Bouguereau's idealized setting permits.

That the family labors all day while still remaining happy—an inherent part of the simple, honest lives bourgeois society wanted to believe peasants lived—is arguably the most

important aspect of Bouguereau's painting. Bouguereau renders this scene of idyllic life free from any struggles or hardships that might undermine this idealized display of peasantry. Both peasants and their infant son exist within a space that is completely removed from the viewer's contemporary life, as evidenced by their outdated clothing. While *Le retour des champs* was on display at the Salon of 1861, the Parisian public, as well as some critics, praised the work for its overtly classical style. Robert Isaacson, one of the most renowned Bouguereau scholars during the 1970's, explains the history behind such images:

[t]he painting of peasant subjects was readily understood as an extension of classical subject-matter . . . A peasant girl carrying a water jar, for example, was considered a reincarnation of the very models used by the Greeks and Romans.⁴¹

Bouguereau's adaptation of classical themes into contemporary rural scenes helped to remove the subject from the world and thereby further idealize the scene. This mother with her angelic face and classical garments could easily be the Virgin mother who cradles the infant Jesus, and the carefree faces of the shepherd and his son create a scene of idyllic harmony. Bouguereau would soon alter his classicizing scenes to include this way of carefree living within a contemporary country setting.

The same carefree lifestyle can be seen in later works such as his *First Caresses* (Figure 9) completed and shown at the Salon of 1866. In this scene, Bouguereau paints nineteenth-century peasant mother and her newborn within the interior of their home. Just as in his *Le retour des champs*, Bouguereau again makes reference to the Madonna and Child, a repeating theme in his earlier works. For this two-figure composition, Bouguereau presents his viewers with a touching scene highlighting the strengthening bond between mother and child. Fronia

⁴¹ Robert Isaacson, "Introduction" to *William-Adolphe Bouguereau: The New York Cultural Center*, in Association with Fairleigh Dickinson University, 13 December 1974 to 2 February 1975: Catalogue and Selection, by Mario Amaya, 7-19, (New York: The Center, 1975), 13.

Wissman points out that in his famous *First Caresses*, the artist emphasizes the mother's adherence to "her role as wife and mother" and the "domestic and personal bliss" obtained thanks to her adherence to the traditional conceptions of motherhood and its associated role to play within the family.⁴² This is one of the many paintings in which the artist illustrates his belief in and reinforcement of conventional gender roles for men and women. Just as this mother knows her place within society, so too do many of his later peasant children come to recognize their own existence overtime in that paradox involving his idealized rural children will begin to be illustrated by the subtle changes in the demeanor of his painted peasant girls.

In the midst of completing this famous painting, Bouguereau also ended his fifteen year business relationship with his galley dealer Durand-Ruel. Mark Steven Walker's has highlighted the importance of this work within the context of his career as an artist:

The year 1866 was when Bouguereau entered into an exclusive contract with Goupil and adopted a decidedly more naturalistic vision of nature. He consequently began to temper his classical idealization for a public that was likewise becoming increasingly influenced by the photograph and its effect on seeing and painting.⁴³

Walker emphasizes here Bouguereau's hesitancy to continue to produce genre scenes by simply re-using figures modeled after classical painters such as Poussin and Raphael. Instead, Bouguereau began to turn to real women and children for his future genre scenes. For Bouguereau's patrons, this adoption of a more naturalistic style of painting peasants from real life rather than simply reinventing classical images from great masters must have been widely appealing, as the seventies brought about countless commissions for peasant children and maidens. Peasantry was a very popular subject for paintings during the nineteenth-century.

⁴² Fronia E. Wissman, *Bouguereau* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 1996), 40.

⁴³ Mark Steven Walker, "First caresses," in *William Bouguereau, 1825-1905*, ed. Louis d'Argencourt and Mark Steven Walker, (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1984), 170.

Wissman explains that “[i]n the pastoral tradition the peasant was seen to possess a simple and honest character, living and equally simple life, in tune with nature and apart from, even ignorant of, artifice.”⁴⁴ While many of the traditional beliefs about children that I introduced earlier mirror this bourgeois’ idealized view of peasants, the innocent nature of the peasant, much like the child, would be contested by social realities. For patrons who purchased works such as Bouguereau’s young shepherdess and knitters, images of peasant children must have offered a view of a natural life other than their own—both as a peasant and as a child. Unlike images done by Jules Breton and Jean François Millet that emphasized a harsher view of French peasant life in the wake of the 1848 Revolution, Bouguereau’s *retardataire* view of barefoot girls must have been more comforting as it can be seen as an idealized form of naturalness.⁴⁵

Such naturalness is expressed in a work done in 1869 titled *The Knitting Girl* (Figure 10). Here, Bouguereau creates a single-figure composition where the central figure encompasses the majority of the foreground. Shown sitting on a wooden beam, this girl stares out over her left side into the distance. Much like the characters in *Le retour des champs* and *First Caresses*, this young girl does not acknowledge the viewer. Rather, she seems content in completing the task at hand all the while enjoying her natural surroundings. While one could argue that this young girl’s work load resembles downright leisure, she is nevertheless engaged in an act of work in that she is in fact knitting. This type of enjoyable, menial labor is also seen in Bouguereau’s *Le retour des champs* and even in *First Caresses*, as a mother’s sole purpose was to work hard to nurture her young. This subtle attempt to depict labor will vanish in Bouguereau’s later works,

⁴⁴ Fronia E. Wissman, *Bouguereau* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 1996), 46.

⁴⁵ See Fronia E. Wissman, *Bouguereau* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 1996), 50. For a more indebt discussion on Breton’s and Millet’s peasants images, see Gabriel Weisberg, *The Realist Tradition: French Painting and Drawing 1830-1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 80-93.

even in a later representation of the same subject. Scholars such as Walker and Sturges believe this young knitter most likely to be inspired by one of the summer trips the artist took to Brittany from 1866 to 1869. In his writing on this piece, Sturges explains that “[t]he full skirt and cut of her bodice suggest a variant of that region’s national costume.”⁴⁶ While one must not be too quick to see this image as an unmediated snapshot of an actual peasant girl, the inclusion of authentic peasant attire in the work substantiates Walker’s claim that Bouguereau’s style became more naturalistic after finalizing his business partnership with Goupil three years prior. As Walker notes, Bouguereau’s knitter exists as “a delicate balance between the extreme classicizing idealizations of his early style and the more naturalistic tendencies of his later years.”⁴⁷ It is no surprise that during these later years, Bouguereau’s work begins to offer a more believable but still fanciful view of the peasantry than his genre scenes modeled after the holy family. In 1875, René Ménard, a writer for *Portfolio*, had this to say about Bouguereau’s mythical view of peasant girls:

Rusticity is not with this painter an instinctive sentiment, and if he paints a patched petticoat he yet suggests an exquisitely clean figure: the naked feet he gives to his peasant-women seem to be made rather for elegant boots rather than for rude sabots; and in a word, it is as if the princesses transformed into rustics by the magic wand in the fairy tales had come to be models for his pictures, rather than the fat-cheeked lasses whose skin is scorched by the sun and whose shoulders are accustomed to heavy burdens.⁴⁸

His commentary on the idealization of these young peasant girls, while seemingly accurate, only describes Bouguereau’s works done prior to 1875.

⁴⁶ Hollister Sturges, *Angels and Urchins: Images of Children at the Joslyn* (Omaha: Joslyn Art Museum, 1980), 57.

⁴⁷ Mark Steven Walker, “The Knitting Girl (Tricoteuse),” in *William Bouguereau, 1825-1905*, ed. Louis d’Argencourt and Mark Steven Walker, (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1984), 179.

⁴⁸ Fronia E. Wissman, *Bouguereau* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 1996), 51.

A Shift in Perception

Unlike the images of peasant adults and children completed during the earlier part of his artistic career, many of Bouguereau's later images offer a more naturalistic view of peasant children in rural France as he quickly began to dispense with the classicizing qualities found in his earlier works. It was during these last decades of the century that the country began to take a serious look at all of its inhabitants, especially its children.⁴⁹ Children came to be seen as the main component in keeping the country from dying out, due to such issues as the degeneration and depopulation of French society. Joshua Cole, a historian of late nineteenth-century French culture, explains that "[h]istorians have usually seen the attention paid to the threat of 'depopulation' as simply the domestic component of a renewed spirit of nationalism that followed the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870."⁵⁰ Just as the war brought problems of degeneration and depopulation to the forefront, placing such an importance on the role children played in securing the nation's future also called into question issues directly associated with the idealized view of childhood constructed over a decade earlier. The country's adults—of whom Bouguereau seems to be no exception—began to express a renewed interest in the lives of all children, not just those of bourgeois families. While the artist had already taken on such themes as knitters, shepherdesses, and other occupations of rural girls, during the last three decades of his career he began to spend more and more time turning out images dealing specifically with rural, lower-class children than during the earlier part of his career.

⁴⁹ Rachel Fuchs, *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and the Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France*, (Albany: State U. of New York, 1984), 50.

⁵⁰ Joshua Cole, *The Power of Large Numbers: Population, Politics, and Gender in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 184.

Many of Bouguereau's later images of agrarian childhood completed during 1880s and 1890s illustrate an increased tendency on the part of the artist to represent idealized peasants as cognizant individuals. Such pensive expression can be seen Bouguereau's *The Young Shepherdess* of 1885 (Figure 11). Often set within the fields of the French countryside, young shepherdesses typically embodied the seductive view of peasantry that was so popular during the nineteenth-century; however, while she is known as the young shepherdess, she takes no part in any shepherding as the picture shows no sign of any physical labor. It is the three sheep located to the right of the young girl that define her profession—small background details secondary to the central figure. Bouguereau also emphasizes her importance by placing the canvas on a vertical axis. In addition to the orientation of the picture plane, the scale of the figure has been increased in such a way that she becomes the sole focal point for the entire painting. This image of a young shepherdess, like many others completed at this time of his career, retains a Knowing expression. In turn, instead of the painting's intended audience being presented with an idealized view of rural childhood, this child acknowledges the presence of her audience with an intense, brooding stare, the same audience she as a child and a peasant is supposed to be ignorant of. As a child, she is meant to enjoy a care-free life of childhood innocence: "a utopian space, separate from adult cares and worries, free from sexuality." As a child and a peasant, she is supposed to exist "outside social divisions, closer to nature and the primitive world."⁵¹ While her world is ideal, and her figure idealized, her knowing of her place in relation to the viewer(s) undermines her innocence. Aware of her own social and sexual position within society as a symbol of innocent childhood, there is a way in which this representation of rural girlhood complicates the

⁵¹ Henry Jenkins, *The Children's Culture Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 3-4.

idealized view of childhood and of peasantry meant to be displayed in Bouguereau's genre scenes of peasant girls.

Foundlings in Rural Society

This change in Bouguereau's peasant representations came in the wake of increased concerns with the general welfare of abandoned children living within rural France. When the Third Republic was declared in 1871 after France's loss in the Franco-Prussian war, a renewed interest in the lives of children resulted in a questioning of what incidents were taking place that jeopardized childhood innocence and what actions could be taken in order to guarantee its survival. Ever since the beginning of the nineteenth century, the absence of nurturing parents, especially a mother figure, was thought to be the primary reason why children and young adults became delinquent members of society. Such a concept was expressed in many of Bouguereau's paintings of peasants. For Bouguereau, the image of the nurturing mother plays an important role in a number of his work. To return briefly to one of the artist's early works, *First Caresses*, one sees the traditional role of mother as nurturer not only included, but championed by such an image. Like mothers in many of his peasant scenes, she not only knows her role within the family dynamic, she embraces her purpose within the dynamic.

House explains that these images display the Madonna/mother archetype as one that is "subordinated to children—particularly boy children."⁵² Evidence for House's claim comes from such images as Bouguereau's *First Caresses* and *Le retour des champs* where it does seem that these mother figures exist for the sole betterment of the child. Bouguereau's insistence on including a boy rather than a girl child seems to be telling as it shows the importance of having a

⁵² John House, "Pompier Politics: Bouguereau's Art." *Art in America* 72 (1984): 143.

male heir to inherit money and property.⁵³ Robert Rosenblum's comment on Bouguereau's images of this kind shed light on their context:

We could write a whole treatise on 19th-century facts and fictions about women, children, and families by studying his work, where typically for a period abandoned families, illegitimate children, and male defections from the church, fathers are virtually absent from both domestic and religious activities.⁵⁴

Rosenblum's comment is quite telling in that it exposes the multiple ways in which the viewer can understand the figures within these two scenes. The audience is presented with a fantasy view of motherhood, one that displays all the necessary qualities of a successful nurturer, while existing apart from the follies of society. It is also important to note Rosenblum's observation about the missing father figure within the representation, as it points to a change in Bouguereau's later works from his earlier images of peasant families. While the absence of the father in this painting speaks to issues of abandoned families, Walker also claims that it can be attributed to the absence of Bouguereau's own father from the family circle.⁵⁵ It is also telling that mothers in his peasant paintings seem to disappear entirely after the 1870s. His future peasant paintings are comprised of either a one- or two-figure composition in which children are shown to have no guardian figure at all.

The same decade that witnessed the disappearance of mother figures within Bouguereau's rural peasant paintings is one that can be defined by a general social acknowledgement of and changing attitude towards the nation's abandoned children. The Third Republic began to instill newer, more tolerant ways of dealing with the ongoing problem rather

⁵³ Henry Jenkins, *The Children's Culture Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 17.

⁵⁴ Robert Rosenblum, "Resurrecting Bouguereau." In William Adolph Bouguereau: *L'Art Pompier*, (New York: Borghi & Co, 1991), 10.

⁵⁵ Walker, "Temptation." In *William-Adolphe Bouguereau L'Art Pompier*, 216-217.

than simply wishing the problem would go away on its own, and the French began to see abandoned children as victims of society who needed help from the state.⁵⁶ For those illegitimate children who were “unfortunate” enough to be born of working-class mothers, foundlings who were abandoned at an early age, or those children whose families could not afford to keep the mother from any other form of work besides the nurturing and educating of her children, the absence of a mother figure was, in theory, meant to be filled by a foster or boarding family.

During the nineteenth century, foundlings accounted for twenty percent of the live births in French cities, and many of these abandoned children made their way to foster homes and apprentice workshops in the French countryside. For foster families, these young foundlings were a means of obtaining more monetary gain, as the government offered incentives for taking in abandoned children until the child reached adolescence. On the child’s twelfth birthday, these young boys and girls would receive their last allotment of clothing from the government. Within a year’s time, one would either take on an intensive role within the family labor system or they were forced to find work at another site.

This process almost always followed the same pattern as almost all of the youth from age twelve to twenty-one found work in some form of agricultural labor.⁵⁷ Rachel Fuchs points out that in 1860 alone, “there were 44,000 abandoned children engaged in agricultural labor in France. Since most of the children had Parisian or other urban mothers, this represents an out-

⁵⁶ Rachel Fuchs, *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and the Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France*, (Albany: State U. of New York, 1984), 54.

⁵⁷ Rachel Fuchs, *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and the Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France*, (Albany: State U. of New York, 1984), 256-257.

migration from urban to a rural area.”⁵⁸ The increasing number of child abandonments and the continuing dissemination of foundlings from metropolitan areas such as Paris to smaller towns throughout the French countryside during the following decades help to expose the fairytale myth of peasants that most urban citizens chose to believe.⁵⁹ It seems a bit difficult to view Bouguereau’s many genre scenes as paintings of peasant children with simple and honest characters living equally simple lives after taking into account the excessive number of abandoned children and adolescents living and working within the French countryside. Unlike the idealized peasants in his *Le retour des champs*, many of the actual peasants working within the fields were both younger and older children whose childhood innocence had already been compromised by their situation within society as foundlings or working children.

The Employing of Domestiques

Bouguereau’s increased interest in depicting young working girls comes at a time when society began to emphasize the importance of safeguarding childhood from such growing problems as the exploitation of children for sexual and labor purposes. While the nineteenth century continued to promote the idealized view of childhood and understood the need to safeguard the nation’s children, the majority of working-classes families saw child labor as a necessity in that children played a crucial role either by completing daily tasks at home or by bringing in additional household income while working outside the home. In his writings on childhood in nineteenth-century France, Heywood emphasizes the mixed emotions many

⁵⁸ Rachel Fuchs, *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and the Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France*, (Albany: State U. of New York, 1984), 256.

⁵⁹ Fuchs points out that during the 1880s and 1890s, the rate of childhood abandonment continued to rise due to a change in restrictions on abandonment. Mothers and their abandoned children were seen less as social deviants and began to be perceived as victims. For more information, see Rachel Fuchs, *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and the Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France*, (Albany: State U. of New York, 1984), 85.

families felt about child labor. He explains that while some rural families continually worried about the future lives of their offspring, “few could spare them a laborious childhood, in the drive to accumulate experience and savings for the future.”⁶⁰ The experience gained by these children and young adolescents while working at home or being boarded out as *domestiques* or *apprentices* led to the acquisition of labor-based knowledge crucial to the future success of these young individuals.⁶¹ More often than not, this acquisition of knowledge was accompanied by an awareness of adult society and its issues—knowledge that quickly replaced the so-called “blank goodness” associated with childhood innocence. No longer oblivious to the ills of adult life, older children began to recognize their own socio-sexual position within society.

This awareness of adult life came quickly to those born into impoverished families. Children gained the skills they needed for the future by working alongside adults, but once they reached fourteen, they entered a critical phase in their life in which they were expected to start making moves towards securing their own futures. This phase would later be viewed as separate stage of childhood, termed in the early 1880s as adolescence. Heywood explains that for most adolescents, securing their futures “inevitably meant looking towards marriage and the launching of a household.”⁶² For those children who were fortunate to be born the eldest son and stay within the walls of the family household, the process of securing their own future was relatively easy as it sometimes required the child simply to work alongside his parents until they inherited

⁶⁰ Colin Heywood, *Childhood in Nineteenth-Century France: Work, health and education among the ‘classes populaires’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 39.

⁶¹ One out of every seven children between the ages fifteen and nineteen had been boarded in non-family houses. Despite their separation from their family, these absent children continued to send their earnings back to their families. See Colin Heywood, *Childhood in Nineteenth-Century France: Work, health and education among the ‘classes populaires’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 37-38

⁶² Colin Heywood, *Childhood in Nineteenth-Century France: Work, health and education among the ‘classes populaires’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 37-38

their land. For all other children of the family (both daughters and younger sons), achieving independence often proved to be a painstaking process that lasted for many years until they reached a marriageable age (twenty-four to twenty-six for women, twenty-five to twenty-eight for men).⁶³ Unlike the children of well-to-do families, the lives of working-class children contradicted the myth of childhood innocence, as their survival (as well as the survival of their families) depended on their ability to generate revenue through various forms of labor.

One way in which older rural children sought to make moves towards securing their independence was to either become an apprentice or a *domestique* for a new master. Heywood's data on the subject illustrates how prevalent child employment was within rural society in that one out of every seven children over the age of fourteen was placed in such positions. When work was scarce or an older child's family was in need of additional income, the opportunity to become a *domestique* within the household of another master was often taken advantage of by older children. Many of these children of underprivileged families were often boarded at various rural and urban labor centers throughout the country just as foundlings were taken in by lower-class foster families under the recommendation and encouragement of the government; however, this transferring of children to different households for monetary or liability reasons did not guarantee that these children received any sort of comparable care to what the traditional family dynamic was perceived to produce. Many of these foster children were treated as second-rate citizens within their new households—a circumstance that often led to idleness and to the eventual delinquency that the state's programs were meant to inhibit.

⁶³ Colin Heywood, *Childhood in Nineteenth-Century France: Work, health and education among the 'classes populaires'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 41. For the discussion of acceptable ages for adolescents to marry, see Rachel Fuchs, *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and the Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France*, (Albany: State U. of New York, 1984), 53.

The youth of rural families often took on an extensive workload in the repetitious lifestyle of rural society. For the most part, peasant girls were meant to take on multiple duties in and around the family domicile. Heywood highlights the grueling lifestyle many young adolescent girls were meant to live in his text:

The peasant girl slipped into the daily of the *fermière*, either within her own family, or as a *servant* for another. Her day might begin with a long walk to the nearest town, in order to sell milk and other farm produce on the market. She would be expected to milk the cows, feed the poultry, help with the cooking, take food to the men working in the fields, fetch water from a well or spring and start the endless round of spinning.⁶⁴

Here, Heywood lists many of the duties a peasant girl was expected to carry out on a daily basis. This passage can offer insight into Bouguereau's paintings of young peasants who invoke a specific mode of work but who do not actively participate in it. Such an example can be seen in Bouguereau's *Young Girl* of 1886 (Figure 12). In this painting, Bouguereau presents his viewers with another vertically oriented composition, much like his *Young Shepherdess* completed one year earlier.

In this painting, Bouguereau presents his viewers with yet another vertically oriented composition, much like his *Young Shepherdess* completed one year earlier. This young girl is shown standing all alone in a scene of endless cliff tops. Once again, except for the viewer, the absence of an adult presence within the picture emphasizes the unsupervised existence of this young adolescent. As she pensively stares out towards the right side of the canvas, this young girl either fails to or chooses not to acknowledge the gaze of the viewer; however, her intense gaze seems to be focused on the unseen individual whose presence, either physical or evoked by the young girl's thoughts, is suggested by the note clenched in the girl's right fist. James Peck, head curator of a recent Bouguereau exhibition, explains that "[t]his implied narrative would

⁶⁴ Colin Heywood, *Childhood in Nineteenth-Century France: Work, health and education among the 'classes populaires'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 28.

explain the maiden's intent gaze off to her left and the psychological tension of the painting."⁶⁵ Such tension threatens the idealized scenes as young peasant girls were supposed to retain innocent lives both as children and as peasants. The emotional appearance of this peasant child is also telling as it also undermines the theme of the Romantic child despite her apparent closeness to nature. As Kincaid, one of the leading scholars of childhood, appropriately explains, "[a]n unhappy child was and is unnatural, an indictment of somebody: parent, institution, nation."⁶⁶ In his choice to include such discontented faces in his later genre scenes such as this, Bouguereau undermines the appealing marginality of these child peasants.

In addition to the cognizant appearance of this young girl's face, the lack of physical work taking place in the scene is also telling as it highlights inconsistencies plaguing the idealized view of rural childhood. Unlike the hard-working peasants of more naturalistic painters painting at this time, Bouguereau chose to emphasize a more idealized view of rural labor rather than harsh realities actual peasants were often subjected to. In whitewashing the lives of peasant children by removing the presence of actual labor, Bouguereau calls into question the inherent innocence of rural childhood, especially for those children hired as *domestiques*. As the nineteenth century progressed, childhood innocence was thought to be safeguarded by instilling discipline in children at an early age. Those children who were seen as delinquents were thought to be predisposed to laziness and vagabondage. Without an adult to supervise this working child, she falls into an idle state that can easily be seen as delinquent rather than ideal. Such a reading is emphasized by the sloping cliffs in the painting's background, as they draw the eyes of the viewer to the folded arms of this young girl. Unlike

⁶⁵ James F. Peck, *In the Studios of Paris: William Bouguereau and His American Students* (Tulsa: Philbrook Museum of Art, 2006), 108.

⁶⁶ James R. Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 80.

Bouguereau's *Knitting Girl* that was done almost twenty years earlier, the artist makes no attempt even to hint at any work taking place within the scene.

Just like the girl portrayed in Bouguereau's *Young Girl*, children and young adolescents who had a substandard work ethic were always interpreted as a sign of delinquency—a delinquency specific to those who lacked a traditional family. It was these negative qualities—laziness, vagabondage, thieving, and sexual licentiousness—that educating and apprenticing of adolescents worked so hard to ameliorate. When a child chose to leave his or her employment, their fleeing was often the site of discussion, as it was seen as an act of defiance by delinquent youths; however, as Fuchs appropriately points out, “[t]o some extent, government officials predicated their policies on ideology rather than on real problems.”⁶⁷ While many working-class youths left their positions of labor, more often than not, they did so in response to some form of mistreatment by their masters. Nevertheless, Third Republic France's comprehension of why children left their apprenticeships and foster families almost always centered on the delinquency of the child and not on the faults of the adult. These child workers who fled from their masters, as Fuchs explains, were regarded as delinquents who “wandered the streets of Paris and the roads of the countryside or went in search of employment that suited them. Police often picked up boys as vagabonds and girls as prostitutes.”⁶⁸ While some of these charges may have been true, many of the young individuals picked up for deviant behavior were simply homeless, tired, and

⁶⁷ Rachel Fuchs, *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and the Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France*, (Albany: State U. of New York, 1984), 264.

⁶⁸ Rachel Fuchs, *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and the Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France*, (Albany: State U. of New York, 1984), 259.

hungry. After their apprehension, they were often sent to new foster families or a new employer.⁶⁹

While many children who fled from their masters were picked up by the authorities, some evaded apprehension completely. These youths often found refuge in larger cities such as Paris and La Rochelle. Once in town, these children were hardly distinguishable from urban working-class youth, perhaps only in their rustic dress. One such painting of Bouguereau's that illustrates this issue is his *Bohemian* completed in 1890 (Figure 13). Here, Bouguereau renders an image of an adolescent girl set on the bank of the Seine in Paris. A one-figure composition solely focused on the young musician, the viewer is forced to look at the lower-class child before any other detail in the work. This image follows the newer set of conventions that Bouguereau started to include in his later genre scenes of peasants. While this young maiden does not reside in the countryside, she still takes on the qualities of a peasant as she can be seen as a "simple" person with little financial means. Most importantly, she is a marginal figure, just like any of the other farmers or knitters Bouguereau chose to paint, and her marginality both as a Bohemian and as a child takes on mythical qualities.

Although the Impressionists of the nineteenth century used the image of a petty bourgeois tourist to illustrate bohemian subject matter, the more traditional view the Bohemian was most often associated with vagabondage. In her text titled *Gypsies and Other Bohemians*, Marilyn Brown illustrates the change in subject during the last decades of the century and Bouguereau's relation to such a redefining of the term. She explains that artists like Bouguereau and Corot were the painters of "real bohemians" in that they continued to depict these marginal figures as

⁶⁹ Rachel Fuchs, *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and the Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France*, (Albany: State U. of New York, 1984), 265..

vagabonds.⁷⁰ Just like *domestiques* who fled their place of employment, often finding their way into the city, these urban bohemians seemed to mirror such a lifestyle. One can even see a similarity in costume with both the young girl depicted in *The Broken Pitcher* and his *Young Shepherdess*, a point of discussion that begs the question of whether or not the articles of clothing are part of the artist's own personal collection of props or simplified, idealized garments. Regardless of their authenticity, the similarity links the *Bohemian* to peasantry in the general sense of the term. The countless amounts of peasant children who migrated to cities in search of work may also account for the correlation.

In accordance with the many scenes of rural peasantry that Bouguereau completes during the last decades of his career, the appearance of the girl is indeed telling as it makes reference to a number of issues. While this young bohemian's gaze is indirectly aimed at the viewer, her pensive look suggests she is an individual aware of her own social position as a marginal character on the periphery of Parisian society. Unlike many of Bouguereau's shepherdesses and knitters that show no physical signs of hardship, there is an attempt on the part of Bouguereau to display the everyday circumstances of a vagabond's life, though this display of filth comes in an idealized form. Bouguereau includes only two blemishes on the body of this young musician. The first one comes in the form of dirt underneath the fingernail of the young girl's left index finger, quite possibly the result of playing a stringed instrument. This inclusion of dirt underneath the nail of this young maiden is subtle, just as the dirty left foot has been appropriately hidden underneath the girl's long skirt. At first glance, this dirt seems to be only a shadow, but in taking a closer look at the top of her foot, it becomes all the more obvious. Compared to more realist painters, Bouguereau idealizes his subjects, even if their position is far

⁷⁰ Marilyn R. Brown, *Gypsies and Other Bohemians: The Myth of the Artist in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), 94.

from idyllic. Still, the placement of the dirty foot within the shadow of the girl's skirt is telling. Perhaps even Bouguereau acknowledges the irony in idealizing a person whose existence is far from "noble."

CONCLUSION

It was during the last decades of the nineteenth century that upper- and middle-class adults began to see children as innocent, but also as cognizant members of society. Not only were adults expected to protect their children from the physical dangers present in both city and rural life, these developing anxieties about children losing their innocence also motivated parents to protect their children's minds as well as their bodies. Childhood education became the primary means for protecting the minds of the nation's youth. As Fuchs points out, during the 1880s and 1890s, privileged children "began staying in school longer, often [becoming] more knowledgeable than the parents,"⁷¹ a defining difference from the previous generations of children that led to the construction of adolescence or youth. While education was seen as a defense against delinquency of children from all economic backgrounds, it failed to protect the disadvantaged youth of both rural and urban working class families, especially those children of impoverished mothers who were left alone for extended periods of time and foundlings who were forced to work instead of attending school. Because of their continual exposure to the harsh realities of working-class life, poor children had the highest risk of becoming corrupt.⁷² They were fully aware of the filthy, corrupt society of which they were a part and this awareness precluded the "blank goodness" or "innocence" that was so crucial in the nurturing process of the Romantic child. The risk of corruption was thought not to apply to rural, working-class children, as the myth of peasantry as honest, "innocent" living continued to permeate the minds of middle- and upper-class citizens.

⁷¹ Rachel Fuchs, *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and the Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France*, (Albany: State U. of New York, 1984), 53.

⁷² Rachel Fuchs, *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and the Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France*, (Albany: State U. of New York, 1984), 52-53.

Still, some of Bouguereau's images of young peasant girls produced during the 1880s and 1890s reflect the growing concerns over the corruption of childhood innocence through the represented child's own self-awareness of her existence as an object of desire for adults. The corruption of childhood innocence is brought about by a growing sexual as well as a social awareness in children and adolescents. Although whitewashed and idealized, in recognizing their idealization as representations of rural children, these young girls are "Knowing children" who display awareness to contemporary social issues taking place in the lives of late nineteenth-century working-class children. In taking up this line of argument, I depart from the typical readings of these paintings that have tended to revolve around the artist's style and choice of subject matter, and that take little or no interest in the physical appearances of these represented subjects. Much like Sturges, I am inclined to see these images as representative of deeper issues rather than simply as an extension of classical subject-matter called 'living antique.'⁷³

Many critics saw Bouguereau's works as nothing more than banal replications of classical poses⁷⁴ that could easily stand in as sentimental scenes of rural peasant life as much as they could be rehashed as Madonna and child compositions. Ultimately, this has linked Bouguereau to a conservative market and his choice to continue to produce works for that market is telling. As early as the 1860s, Bouguereau's work began to be severely criticized by many contemporary critics for being prime examples of the "academic banality" that only the unsophisticated middle-class could enjoy, and it seems that such analyses coupled with Bouguereau's artistic and social

⁷³ See Robert Isaacson, Introduction to *William-Adolphe Bouguereau: The New York Cultural Center, in Association with Fairleigh Dickinson University, 13 December 1974 to 2 February 1975* ed. Mario Amaya, 7-19 (New York: The Center, 1975) 13.

⁷⁴ Albert Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Phaidon, 1971), 19. While Boime does not use the term to specifically comment on Bouguereau's representations of young peasants, he does use the term "banality" to describe the *pompier* art with which Bouguereau is so often equated.

conservatism have hindered other interpretations of his later works. Regardless of their positive or negative critiques of his peasant scenes, critics, like his adoring public, believed this type of imagery simply to be idealized, sentimental genre scenes that “posed no threat to the social order.”⁷⁵ At a time when critics of art were championing a modern art that reflected modern life, the classicizing qualities that Bouguereau’s peasant scenes sought to portray came to be seen as nostalgic subjects for painting that resembled nothing of the modern world.

Bouguereau would continue to paint these stylized images of idealized peasants until his death in 1905. However, the appearance of many of his knitters and shepherdesses would gradually change during the last thirty years of the century. In many of the peasant scenes done during the 1880s and 1890s, the naturally innocent faces one would expect to find in a supposedly care-free agrarian scene are replaced by those that show an awareness of their own existence as objects of desire for the audience. These peasants then become what Higonnet calls “Knowing children:” children that appear to be endowed with “psychological or physical individuality” while at the same time remaining distinctively child-like.⁷⁶ Like a clean, blank slate onto which adults could project their own ideals, these representations of peasants recognize that they too are the products of an adult projection—society’s own conception of idyllic childhood as being close to nature and unaware of adult society. In returning the gaze, they undermine both the myth of childhood innocence and of agrarian life existing in the minds of late-nineteenth century society in that they no longer exist as blank individuals unaware of both adult and bourgeois society. As Jenkins puts it, it is the innocent child that “wants nothing,

⁷⁵ Fronia E. Wissman, *Bouguereau* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 1996), 33.

⁷⁶ Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (New York, N.Y.: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 12.

desires nothing, and demands nothing—except, perhaps, its own innocence.”⁷⁷ By contrast, many of Bouguereau’s later representations appear to want nothing more than to have their lost innocence returned—or rather their own ignorance of their existence as objects of desire reestablished.

⁷⁷ Henry Jenkins, *The Children's Culture Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 1-2.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kyle Aaron Roberts received his BA in Art from the University of Central Florida in 2005. As an undergraduate student, his research centered on ancient and Gothic architecture and sculpture within Christendom. While at University of Central Florida, Kyle also worked at the Orlando Museum of Art where he researched and wrote educational material for the 2004 exhibition, "Patterns of Life: Bold and Powerful Ndebele Art of South Africa." As a master's student at the University of Florida, he began to focus on the work of late nineteenth-century French Academic painters such as Bouguereau, Gerôme, and Girodet. His interest in representations of children by such artists Bouguereau and Sargent ultimately led him to question how these images functioned for their contemporary European and American audiences. During his time at the University of Florida, he also helped to organize the Society of Art History Graduates' fifth annual symposium "Muses and Means: Patronizing the Arts" which took place in 2007.