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The Hundred-Year Childhood

By KEN JOHNSON

Childhood, it is often said, is a recent invention. Children used to be treated as small adults to be put to work as soon as possible. Education meant discipline and punishment. Then came the 20th century and the idea that children are fundamentally different from adults and should be treated accordingly. The ideal child, a creature of terrific potential, became an inspiring symbol of futurity, and the care and education of actual children exercised the minds of great thinkers, including many from the fields of art and design.

“Century of the Child: Growing by Design, 1900-2000,” a big, wonderful show at the Museum of Modern Art, examines the intersection of Modernist design and modern thinking about children. A rich and thought-provoking study of a great subject, it is loaded with intriguing things to look at — some 500 items, including furniture, toys, games, posters, books and much more.

Juliet Kinchin, a curator in MoMA’s architecture and design department who organized the show along with Aidan O’Connor, a curatorial assistant, observes in her catalog introduction that no period in human history was as invested in concern for children as the 20th century. Yet contradictions abound: “Elastic and powerful,” Ms. Kinchin writes, “the symbolic figure of the child has masked paradoxical aspects of the human predicament in the modern world.” How much freedom to allow and how much control to impose are questions not only about children but also about people everywhere in a time of declining traditional values and expanding possibilities for new ways of being and doing.

What do children need to flourish and become proper members of society? How you answer such questions depends on what you think the essential nature of the child is. Implicitly if not overtly, a different image of the child presides over each of the exhibition’s seven chronologically laid-out sections.

At the start we meet what you might call the rational-creative child, who, given the right materials to play with and a few logical guidelines, will turn into a little architect. Here are kits for creating two- and three-dimensional designs developed by Friedrich Froebel, the founder of the kindergarten movement in the early 19th century. A teaching tool kit full of

variously shaped nonrepresentational objects created by Maria Montessori is more colorful and inviting, but it too is based on the understanding that huge, complicated things are usually made from little things following simple rules.

Moving on to the post-World War I era, another vision of childhood comes into view under the heading "Avant-Garde Playtime." Here one of the most telling objects is a painting called "The Bad Child" (around 1924), a decorative panel for a child's bedroom by the illustrator and designer Antonio Rubino. In retro-Victorian style it pictures a boy in a comical rage surrounded by a menacing cast of fairy tale characters. The moral may be that the child bedeviled by hobgoblins of small minds becomes a monster himself. Being irrepressibly energetic and playful, children need room to express their impulses and imaginations, which do not always align with adult, bourgeois strictures of behavior.

This version of the child can be seen as a reflection of the avant-garde artist's own desire to shed burdensome moral and aesthetic conventions. (And to celebrate his own powers; this was a time when the idea of the child as a pure creative genius captivated artists like Klee, Miró and Picasso.)

So it may be not so surprising to learn that the Futurist painter Giacomo Balla designed pieces of children's furniture like a simple, painted wood wardrobe on view here, held off the floor by a pair of flat, abstracted cutouts of children. Here too are child-size chairs and desks by De Stijl artists, including a delightful diminutive wheelbarrow by Gerrit Rietveld; it is remarkable how little needed to change in scaling down the basic language of simple rectilinear forms and primary colors. It is almost as if these artists had been designing for their idea of the child all along.

An opposite approach to childhood enters the picture in the 1930s as fascist social engineers in Germany and Japan turned to children as raw material to be molded into cogs for industrial and military machinery. A baleful section on these developments, as reflected in photographs, posters and children's books, is highlighted by startling kimonos for Japanese children patterned with images of warplanes, bombs and cannons.

Consciousness of the needs of children and how best to serve them expanded in all directions after World War II. Health and hygiene became concerns, and designers were called upon to create not only more constructive toys and functional furniture but entire school buildings that would provide the light, air and space that youngsters need to grow sound minds and bodies. The rational-creative child, the playful, unruly child — these were eclipsed by the healthy child, who would be more amenable to a new era of conformity in the 1950s.

Then came consumerism and the advent of the needy child, driven by wants and desires he did not know he had until they were triggered by popular media. From astronaut costumes and ray guns in the '60s to Nintendo's Game Boy of 1989, designers and manufacturers catered to juvenile fantasies with predatory resourcefulness.

The contradictions of contemporary childhood come together most resonantly in a display of props designed by the artist Gary Panter for the television program "Pee-wee's Playhouse" (1986-91) arranged around a video projection of an episode of the show. Surrounded by friendly characters like Globey, an animated world globe, and Chairy, a soft, big-eyed chair, the antic man-child Pee-wee, played by Paul Reubens, resembles a happier version of Rubino's bad boy. He lives in an artificial world without adult supervision where almost all his fantasies come true. Yet he is constantly buffeted by his own desires and frustrations. He is the infantilized consumer par excellence, and in his archly knowing performance as a children's show host, he is too a kind of postmodern Pop artist, toying subversively with the semiotics of mass entertainment.

The exhibition ends on a rueful note with a brief section about playgrounds that includes a model for a pastoral playground by the sculptor Isamu Noguchi from 1961. Playground designers in recent years have been stymied by increasingly stringent demands for safety. But how do you give children freedom to explore and test their abilities while minimizing risk and lawsuits? The image of the vulnerable, endangered child haunts today's consciousness more urgently than ever, as children increasingly do their playing online, in often seamy virtual realities where real-life strangers with bad intentions are easily encountered. And what about the child who is dangerous to others? The issues are only going to get more complicated and the challenges for designers of the 21st century more daunting.

"Century of the Child: Growing by Design, 1900-2000," continues through Nov. 5 at the Museum of Modern Art, (212) 708-9400, moma.org.