"The Delicious Character of Youth":
Harold and Mildred Colton

HERALDED IN 1899 by the respected painter and teacher William Merritt Chase as “not only the greatest living woman painter, but the best that has ever lived,” Cecilia Beaux has failed to maintain this rank.¹ Eclipsed by her fellow Pennsylvania Academy alumna Mary Cassatt, largely because of the latter’s Impressionist alliance, Beaux’s work has, in the last two decades, become the subject of renewed interest on the part of art historians and the general public. A resolutely independent painter, Beaux is highly regarded for her portraits of upper-class Americans: women, men, and children.

The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts possesses the largest collection of Beaux’s work in the world, ranging from paintings and drawings to sketchbooks and material objects. With the 1999 acquisition of Harold and Mildred Colton (fig. 1), made possible by the generosity of descendants of the sitters, that collection has been significantly enriched. (The painting had been on long-term loan to the institution since 1974.) This acquisition, along with a recent gift of archival photographs discussed elsewhere in this journal, establishes the Academy as the major study center for the art and life of Cecilia Beaux.

A work that reveals the artist’s influential Philadelphia realist training, Harold and Mildred Colton is her first double portrait of children—a subject that Cassatt had begun to paint at approximately the same time. Beaux

¹ Chase’s remark was made on the occasion of Beaux’s receipt of a gold medal from the Carnegie Institute; quoted in Cecilia Beaux: Portrait of an Artist, exhibition catalogue, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (Philadelphia, 1974), 17. Harrison S. Morris, the Academy’s managing director from 1892 to 1905, praised Beaux in his memoirs: “There was, indeed, a sort of halo about her and her work; she was liked so well, she was so rarely talented, so unaffected, so simple, so winning and, if I may say it, so beautiful, that everybody was eager to give her the praise which she so richly deserved.” See Harrison S. Morris, Confessions in Art (New York, 1930), 196.

THE PENNSYLVANIA MAGAZINE OF HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY
Vol. CXXIV, No. 3 (July 2000)
started Harold and Mildred just over a year after she had won the Mary Smith Prize for Les derniers jours d’enfance (see Tappert, fig. 4) at the Academy’s annual exhibition in 1885. (The Smith prize was then awarded for the best work by a woman artist in the annual exhibition.) In these terms, Harold and Mildred Colton confirms Beaux’s bid for professional status in the years before her studies in France. As Tara Tappert has noted, the artist’s pride in the Coltons’ portrait is suggested by a contemporary photograph of Beaux’s studio that shows the painting on display and the eighteenth-century chair on the model’s stand (fig. 2).2

Harold and Mildred Colton is a penetrating portrayal of two descendants of the famed Philadelphia patriarch Charles Willson Peale: a future University of Pennsylvania professor of zoology and archaeology, specializing in Native American populations of the Southwest, and his younger sister. With great aplomb, the artist depicted her young sitters as confident individuals, wise beyond their age, possessing as much character and psychological complexity as adults. The figures are set in an impressionistically defined interior space that is at once general and specific—signified by the eighteenth-century chair and Oriental jardiniere, typical furnishings of “tasteful” upper-class homes as well as “artistic” studios at this time.

The presentation of the children both adheres to standard art historical treatments and complicates them. Their gender-specific attributes—the boy’s whip symbolizing the active “masculine” realm of culture, the girl’s piece of fruit evoking the “female” sphere of nature—clearly reference eighteenth-century portrait conventions3 Yet, it is the suggestion of the children’s internal lives, apparent in the anxious perch of Harold and the quizzical gaze of Mildred, that transforms the work into a sensitive, markedly unsentimental, and modern expression of two distinctive personalities. As such, in its artistic and psychological resonance, the painting stands alongside such striking images of children as John Singer Sargent’s The Daughters of Edward D. Boit (1882). Significantly, like the

3 See Roland E. Fleischer, “Emblems and Colonial American Painting,” American Art Journal 20 (1988), 3–35. Tappert also observes in both Harold and Mildred Colton and A Little Girl (Fanny Travis Cochran) the influence of contemporary studio portrait photography, noting that the Coltons may have been “partially painted from a photograph.” Tappert, “Choices,” 78–79.
Fig. 1. Cecilia Beaux, *Harold and Mildred Colton*. Oil on canvas, 1887. 55 7/8 x 41" Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Partial gift of Capt. and Mrs. J. Ferrell Colton; partial purchase from the Academy Purchase Fund.
Sargent, Beaux’s painting may be read as a decidedly Aesthetic production, revealing both her knowledge of the contemporary tonal approach of James McNeill Whistler (particularly in the treatment of the background) as well as her prior experience with domestic design.4

In her day, Beaux was critically acclaimed for her unusually sensitive depictions of children. One reviewer ascribed this success to the way she explored “the delicious character of youth without the degrading prettiness that attends so many renderings of the rose leaf skin, and tenderly modulated forms of childhood.”5 Much as Thomas Eakins portrayed his sitters in particular environmental settings in order to explore a richer understanding of character, habit, and, inevitably, social status, Beaux painted her young upper-class Americans in what one writer termed “precisely the right environment to emphasize their inherent individuality, giving to each a simple dignity which is the badge of innocence and breeding.”6 The Coltons appear dignified yet childlike: he with his rumpled white shirt coming untucked at the waist; she with her striped socks slipping ever so slightly in their careful folds.

This attention to detail, which gave Beaux’s imagery its particular sparkle, also suggested late nineteenth-century upper-class attitudes about child rearing. Generally, childhood was considered to be a magical, innocent time of life, in which separation from the adult world and its attendant responsibilities and stresses was deemed critical to a child’s development. If children were to mature into productive citizens, imaginative play required the same attention as formal schooling and moral instruction. Beaux certainly shared this belief, claiming that “children, as individuals, need privacy far more than grown people, and it should be automatic.”7

4 Like many women artists of her generation, Beaux explored decorative design at the beginning of her career, earning a reputation as a noted china painter. Her sensitivity to “artistic” trappings, revealed in photographs of her decorated studio and home, likely derived from this early experience with and respect for the so-called design arts. See Tappert, “Choices,” 85-88, 109-11, and Toohey in this volume.


7 Quoted in Tappert, Choices, 305.
The issue of privacy, or the mysterious workings of a child's mind, resonates in *Harold and Mildred Colton*. Indeed, the painting has always suggested to me Henry James's 1897 novella, *The Turn of the Screw*, and its enigmatic protagonists Miles and Flora. In this haunting tale, James called into question the entire notion of childhood innocence and morality. Have Miles and Flora been corrupted by the alleged ghosts; or does the governess merely hallucinate these evil characters? The story is filled with innuendo and ambiguity—absences and "silences" utilized to great effect—that increase the reader's uncertainty.  

On a metaphorical level, James's children may signal the fear and sickness of fin-de-siècle culture. The use of the innocent child as a catalyst for crisis that forces adults to acknowledge their own moral shortcomings was a

---

popular convention in 1890s literature. In this context, Beaux, the portrait painter, plays a role suggestive of James’s New Woman governess—uncovering in her sitters an acute psychological depth and insight that unsettles as it charms.

The significance of Harold and Mildred Colton to the Academy is rich and multifaceted. Not only does the painting possess important interconnections to Philadelphia, the Peale legacy, and the institution’s history but, as Beaux’s strongest portrayal of children to date, it complements her other 1887 portrait of a young personality, A Little Girl (Fanny Travis Cochran), (see Connors, fig. 2) in the institution’s collection. Both paintings were first exhibited in the juried annual exhibition of 1888, where they won positive reviews. Interestingly, Beaux was drawn to engaging children who, like the artist herself, later became trailblazing adults; Cochran grew up to be a militant social activist.

The Academy holds both an oil study and a sketchbook drawing for Harold and Mildred Colton. In these terms, the portrait completes a group of images that reveal Beaux’s working methods, something of particular interest to the Academy’s faculty and students. As the largest depository of Beaux’s art, the Academy is, undoubtedly, the most appropriate home for this extraordinary work by an extraordinary painter.

Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts

Sylvia Yount