

THE FINE ART OF REPRESENTING CHILDREN ON THE STREETS

VID INGELEVICIS

The two principal photographers of early 20th century Toronto that appear in our exhibition, William James and Arthur Goss, were both deeply embedded in the world of photography but in different capacities. James, an immigrant from Britain in 1906, focused on the relatively new occupation of freelance news photography and Goss was hired in 1911 by the City of Toronto to document the activities of various municipal departments for mostly internal use. However, both seemed well aware of the relationship between fine art and photography. James' style – often focusing on individuals using a shallow depth-of-field that eliminated or subdued busy backgrounds - echoed the painterly genre of portraiture. Goss tended to effect a more expansive, descriptive style in his City of Toronto-commissioned work; people (and especially children) appeared almost incidentally. Goss was, however, quite familiar with trends in art photography and, as a member and president of the Toronto Camera Club, he produced and showed his "art", photographs made in the then-popular Pictorial style, more expressive and softer. This personal work was much different than his cooler, less overtly manipulated record work for the city.

In our exhibition, part of the first section recalls fine art and photographic precedents for the picturing of poor children and suggests the existence of a genre that took as its subjects underprivileged street children. Known as "waifs", "ragamuffins", "gamins" and, in a subset of this genre, "newsies" (newsboys), artists depicted them, often looking forlorn, on the grimy streets of London, New York and, as shown in our exhibition, even Toronto. In her book, "Young America: Childhood in 19th century Art and Culture", Claire Perry notes the range of depictions and their motivations as follows:

"Some artists portrayed street children as innately vicious, handing them responsibility for their own misery because of some moral or physical defect. Poor children were also depicted as the passive, innocent, and eminently reformable victims of unfortunate circumstances. A third version represented the waif as a go-getter whose ambition and ability were honed by adverse fortunes. Each visual interpretation was indirectly related to a proposed solution to the problem of child poverty – from building more prisons and organizing houses of refuge to adopting a laissez-faire attitude that would allow 'nature' to portion out equitably society's resources."

The popularity of this genre of art is evidenced by the fact that it found its way to Toronto, as represented by both F. M. Bell-Smith's pair of 1878 paintings of "newsies" on Toronto's King St. and, imported from England, Albert Leslie Smith's "The Newsboy", 1889, which has hung in Toronto's Granite Club since the late 19th century. In addition, key Toronto reformers like J. J. Kelso were in possession of postcards of paintings sent from Britain such as Lady Dorothy Stanley's "His First Offence", 1896, showing a poor, young boy being arraigned in court.

By highlighting these precedents our intent was to suggest a kind of a priori image environment related to the representation of children that would have had to be taken into account by photographers like Goss and James when it came to considering how to depict children on the streets of Toronto in their own practices.