

GIRLHOOD

CLAIRE
MARIE
HEALY

**Look Again: the national collection of
British Art reimaged for today**

Look Again is a new series of short books, opening up the conversation about British Art over the last 500 years, and exploring what art has to tell us about our lives today.

Written by leading voices from the worlds of literature, politics and culture, each book sheds new light on some of the most well-known, best-loved and thought-provoking artworks in the national collection, and asks us to look again.

LOOK AGAIN
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Hanging on the walls of galleries around the world are hundreds of works titled *Portrait of a Girl*. But what is the purpose of a *Portrait of a Girl*? What should she do and who is she for? These are the questions that writer Claire Marie Healy explores in *Girlhood*.

Experiences of girlhood are shaped by art and visual culture as much as they are represented by them. Claire Marie Healy explores this relationship, guiding us through the making and meaning of girlhood in Britain's national collection of art. She traces the journey of 'the girl' in art, from a silent subject of portraiture to a self-expressive creator of self-portraiture. By studying the images that are made, collected, and shared by teenage girls today, *Look Again: Girlhood* invites us to re-address patriarchal art historical narratives and explore diverse contemporary expressions of girlhood/s – both in the gallery space, and on our screens.

GIRLHOOD

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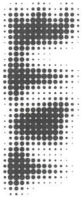
Front cover: Francesca Woodman, *Space², Providence, Rhode Island 1976*
(detail), photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, 14 x 14, Tate

Measurements of artworks are given in centimetres, height before width,
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Director's Statement

'Look Again' is a bold new publishing programme from Tate Publishing and Tate Britain. In these books, we are providing a platform for some of the most exciting contemporary voices writing today to explore the national collection of British art in their own way, and reconnect art to our lives today. The books have been developed ahead of the rehang of Tate Britain's collection, which foregrounds many of the artworks discussed here. In this third set of books – *Death* by Sean Burns, *Strangers* by Ismail Einashe *Girlhood* by Claire Marie Healy, and *Faith* by Derek Owusu – we are offered unique perspectives on a wide range of artworks across British history, and encouraged to look closely, and to look again.

Alex Farquharson, Director, Tate Britain

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The girls were always everywhere. They have been with me and around about; they wait in the wings, in their hundreds, their thousands. I've seen them inside gilded frames, peered at by girls on school trips, kohled eyes locking over centuries. I've seen them in the window displays of exclusive spaces which are the stomping ground not of schoolgirls, but the older art collector: all those men who have appreciated these renderings of innocent-looking damsels – or, rather, who appreciate the price they fetch. I've seen them looping and infinite, online, on screens (here, they move faster than anyone could catch hold of their skirt hems and give them a title). On search engines, their smiles are purchasable as a stock image; on social media feeds, girlhood is for sale in other, more subtle ways. Then the feed refreshes.

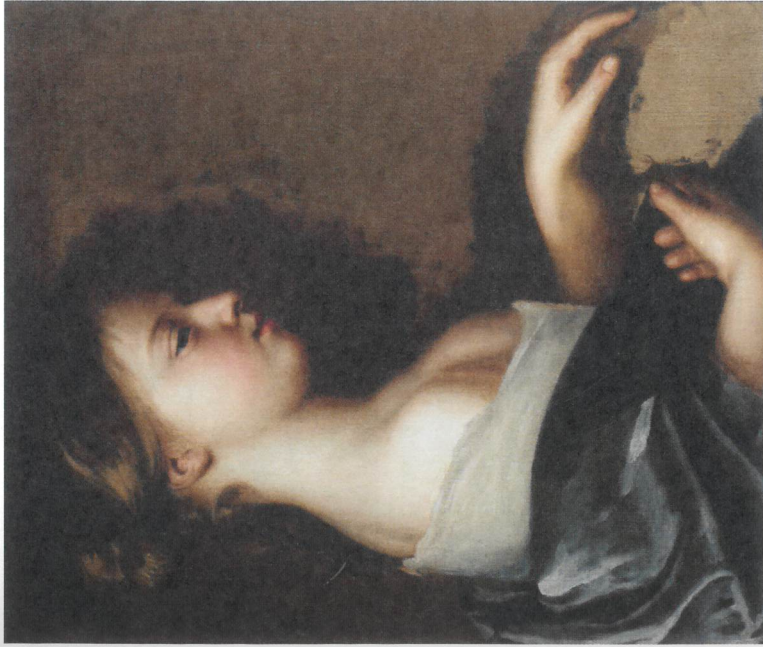
The annals of art history suggest their own anonymising title for all these girlhoods: *Portrait of a Girl*. Sometimes, she is a *Portrait of a Young Girl* or, chopped in two, a *girl at Half-Length*. When she is not a *Girl*, she is a *Miss*. In *Profile*, she avoids

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our gaze; more often, she meets it head on. Her head and shoulders have been studied, modelled and sketched, painted, imaged, recreated. But among these infinite variations – this anonymous army of girls – some burn more brightly than others. Because there have always been those who seem to tell us something about what makes up our communal ideas of girlhood, girls who leap from the frame to speak with our own experience of it.

Here's one.

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Mary Beale, *Portrait of a Young Girl* 1681, oil paint on canvas, 53.5 x 46, Tate

In this *Portrait of a Young Girl* 1681 by Mary Beale, the figure is totally anonymous. Anything that we know for sure about the painting renders it unremarkable: it was painted by Beale when her popularity was beginning to wane, and its muddy colours indicate it was most likely a testing ground for new painting methods. While we tend to imagine that any work framed in a gallery always aspired to its own greatness, this work was intended as nothing more than a quick sketch-in-oils of whichever pretty girl happened to be around – perhaps Beale's goddaughter, or even her studio assistant, whose work clothes you can imagine being hurriedly draped with the fabrics of finery. When we encounter this *Young Girl* in person, however, she begins to break the bounds of her making. The immediacy and informality of the sketch brings her out of one time and context, into our own. No longer an afterthought, the girl is a time-traveller. She side-eyes across aeons. What is she thinking?

A desire to give an identity to art history's many young female subjects has informed much curatorial thinking in the last decade. Whistler's copper-haired subject of *Symphony in White, No. 1* 1861–2 – actually seventeen year-old Irish immigrant Joanna Hiffernan – recently garnered her own exhibition at the Royal Academy. And the identity of Edgar

Degas's *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* 1880–1, the three-foot-tall wax sculpture that the art world ridiculed on its debut at the Impressionist Salon, has been identified as Marie van Goethem, one ballerina among some hundreds of *petit rats* who rehearsed and performed at the Paris Opera; the global fame, and later multiplications in bronze, of Degas's sculpture read as bleakly ironic given how Marie's own life was so desperately circumscribed.

I am less interested in such biographical detail, however, than in approaching works with the tangible feeling of the encounter, to sift through the visual and uncover the girlhood/s from the girls.¹ It's a method inspired in spirit by a figure like Saidiya Hartman, who has used scant records of real lives as a springboard to illuminate 'the radical imagination and everyday anarchy of ordinary coloured girls, which has not only been overlooked, but is nearly *unimaginable*'² (my emphasis). If certain portraits of art history allow us to *imagine* girls' emotional and inner lives, it's because there exists in them something that speaks with our own. In this light, girlhood can be understood as less a prescribed length of time, more a way-of-seeing that never really leaves us.

I also want to consider how such images of girlhood have moved and changed hands. Portraits of girls,

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which nowadays travel at hyper-speed online, have always circulated as objects of desire and value. Considered as such, the portraits of young royals like Marie Antoinette – whose fourteen year-old visage was sent across Europe to be judged by the French court and reproduced as miniatures or satirical sketches countless times in her reign – seem closer to pictures sent between boys' phones without girls' consent today than the images alone would ever suggest.

If girlhood is often thought of as a hole we drop into and scramble out of by our nails – hoping that we might emerge into adulthood unscathed from all its events – then what happens if we drop into that hole, following one of its most recognisable products as we go? Not through, but perhaps *down*...

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Peter Blake, *Just at this moment, somehow or other, they began to run* 1970, screenprint on paper, 24.3 x 18, Tate

Peter Blake's 1970 *Alice*, one of a series of illustrations for Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, doesn't deviate far from the established public image of the character: a girl so blonde, so Caucasian, so universally clad in the paraphernalia of girlhood (pleated dress, Mary Jane shoes, *Alice* band) that she sticks in our minds, principally, as a cartoon. Deriving from a children's story written about and for a seven-year-old girl, the character of *Alice* has experienced a kind of twentieth-century coming of age explicitly through the visual – an adolescence brought on by the artists, designers and filmmakers who have been inspired by her journey through a surreal, inhospitable universe and, I would wager, by the daring streak that separates the protagonist from the Victorian morals she's supposed to represent.³ *Alice*, as the first art sensation designed explicitly for children – until Carroll's book, they were seldom considered as a separate category to adults at all – is not so much a girl as an idea that opens culture to a concept of girlhood in the first place.

With *Alice*, the groundwork is laid for a pattern that will continue in portraiture of girlhood/s through time: the projection of artistic or political ideals onto their pretty little heads. Blake saw *Alice* as representative of his ruralist ideals; I prefer to see Blake's *Alice* as a girl who, like one dropped into the hole of adolescence, troubles easy definitions. She is,

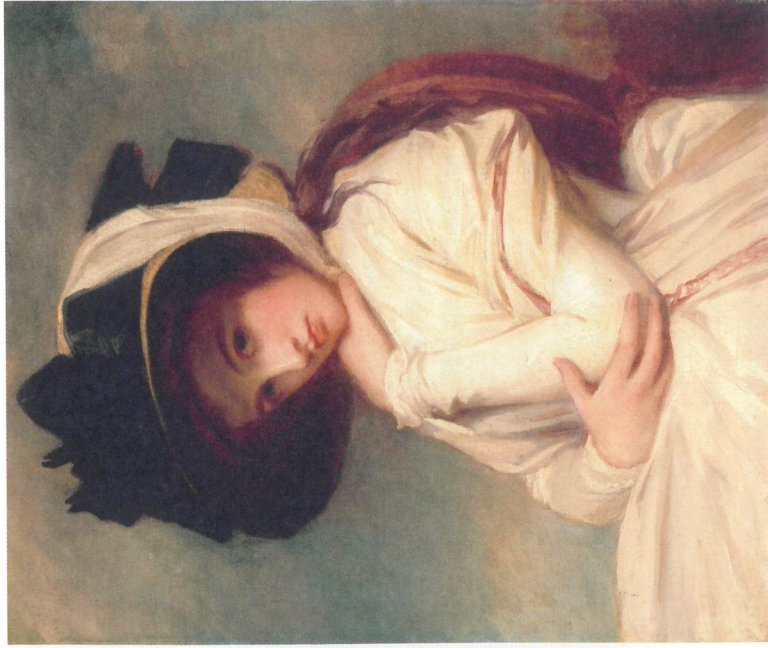
after all, constantly threatening to break through the white borders of her image, as in this moment when *Alice* is whisked up and ordered to run by the Queen of Hearts. *Alice*'s raised arm gestures to the world outside the frame; don't look at me, it says – look *there*.

What happens if we do as we are told? As *Alice*'s creation in and through the visual shows, depictions of girlhood/s in art seem to run away from their origins, shapeshifting in the eyes of their beholder. Maybe girlhood isn't a trap but, like the rabbit hole, a portal.

That teenage girls are so recognisable in portraiture through time, and yet not exactly recognised, speaks to their inherently ambiguous status. At once child and adult, innocent and sexual, protected and vulnerable, threatened and threat, in the shadows and spot-lit, girlhood occurs as a kind of ongoing moment between two reactive states. As well as having been channelled into work that is revealing of these ambiguities, this in-betweenness has also provided an opportunity to challenge the idea of what portraiture is really for to begin with.

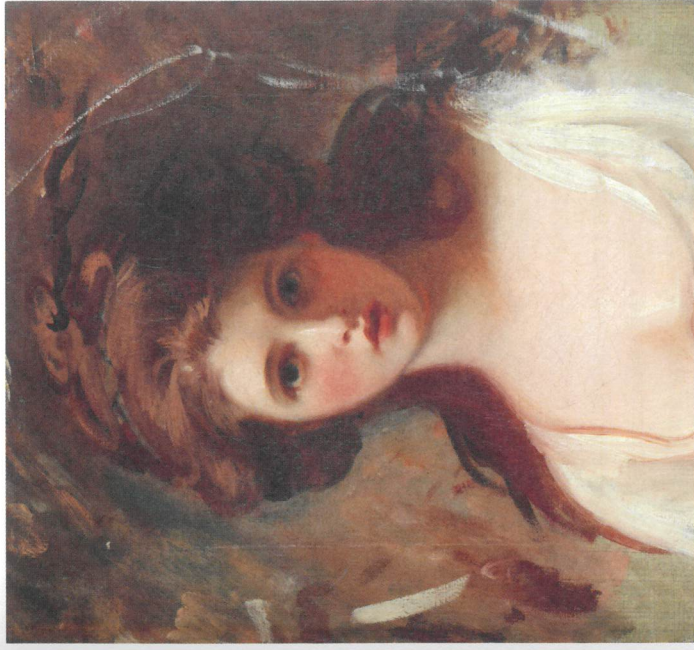
Though we might be able to tell that these two paintings are of the same young woman, we probably wouldn't bet on it.

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George Romney, *Emma Hart, later Lady Hamilton, in a Straw Hat* c.1782-94, oil paint on canvas, 76.2 x 63.5, Huntington Art Collection

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George Romney, *Emma Hart as Circe* 1782, oil paint on canvas, 53.3 x 49.5, Tate

They are two of many paintings Regency-era painter George Romney made of the teenaged Emma Hart (married name Hamilton), already described as 'London's biggest celebrity' by the time she found herself posing for the established artist. At this time of their meeting, she had already metamorphosed several times – from out-and-out poverty to table-dancing to out-of-wedlock pregnancy, to her latest status, at the time of these portraits, as lover to a wealthy gentleman – though it would be some years until her notable tenure as Admiral Nelson's great love. Both paintings might depict Hart aged seventeen, but it is in their framing that they diverge so tellingly.

In *Emma Hart, later Lady Hamilton, in a Straw Hat* c.1782–94 (also known as *Emma Hamilton as a Young Girl (aged seventeen)*), she is the picture of innocence. Her dress and straw hat are of a demure, everyday quality, and her pose is hunched, as if she is making herself smaller. In *Emma Hart as Circe* 1782, our picture of Hart rearranges itself: like a supermodel in close-up on a fashion cover, her gaze is direct and her lips a little open; her clothes, hair and backdrop are daubed, not concrete, mere draping for her beauty. If Hart is meant to be the seductive Greek goddess Circe here, there are no clues in the painting itself. Instead, Romney reduces his subject to the myth's core archetype: that of the predatory woman.

What came first: Hart's reputation as a seductress beyond her years, or Romney's depiction of her as such? When I look at her I think about the depictions of teenage celebrities of other eras: of Brooke Shields, portrayed as a sexual, knowing creature in Richard Avedon's infamous Calvin Klein advertising campaign, when she is just fourteen years old. I also note how, in the titles of both works, Hart is described 'as' something else: in each, she plays a role given to her by another. Romney's paintings of Hart tell us something about how girlhood always feels like a period of acting–something–out. Much later, the muse would become known for her 'attitudes': a kind of early performance art in which Hart played different characters in tableau for her friends to guess, like living versions of those portraits. Called 'the most extraordinary compound I ever beheld' by a contemporary diplomat, Hart's unpindownability was always inseparable from her own creative charge.