RICHARD COSWAY (British, 1742–1821)

Portait of Catherine Clemens and Her Son, John Marcus Clemens

C. 1800

Watercolor on ivory; oval, 9 x 7.3 cm (3½ x 2⅞ in.)

Signature: none

Setting: gold frame set with graduated split pearls

The Edward B. Greene Collection, 1941.552

RICHARD COSWAY was adept at painting children. This sensitive portrait of Catherine Clemens and her son, John Marcus, was painted around 1800 and exemplifies the prettiness for which Cosway was so well known. The artist’s trademark turquoise blue sky is reflected in the boy’s brilliant blue eyes and the bow on the frock that slips informally off his shoulder. This miniature also showcases Cosway’s mature technique of delicate stipplework throughout the faces, contrasted with looser brushstrokes for the hair and garments. Both John Marcus and his mother are swathed in white ruffled fabric, against which the paleness of their skin seems even more pronounced. Like his contemporaries, Cosway used the bare ivory ground to enhance the creaminess of flesh tones. John Marcus wears a coral necklace, frequently given to children during this period as a talisman believed to ward off illness. His innocent, childish gesture of reaching down his mother’s dress for her breast is awkward considering his disproportionately large size. The fact that he is still young enough to wear a gown rather than breeches suggests that he is under four years of age, and yet his head and lips are larger than his mother’s. During the final decades of the eighteenth century, aristocratic women as prominent as the Duchess of Devonshire were electing to breastfeed...
their children rather than send them to wet nurses, and this may be a delicate reference to Catherine Clemens’s philosophy of “natural” parenting. Generally speaking, a portrait of a mother and her son might serve several purposes in addition to being a charming keepsake. It could celebrate the fulfillment of a woman’s critical responsibility to produce an heir to the family fortune, or act as an antidote to charges of scandal or extravagance by exhibiting a woman as actively grounded in her children’s development. Portraits of mothers with their children were much more common in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain than were portraits of fathers with their children.

More than just a touching portrait of a mother and child, this painting represents a new attitude toward rearing children rooted in late-eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophy. Replacing the age-old wisdom that children were the inheritors of original sin and thus parents must be vigilant disciplinarians was the notion that childhood was a period of innocence that ought to be treasured by nurturing fathers and mothers.¹ The close and playful bond between John Marcus and his mother is the result of this modern celebration of childhood and is comparable to Benjamin West’s portrait of his wife and son (fig. 1). West was a contemporary of Cosway, but this oil painting in the neoclassical style and Italian Renaissance vernacular is as different stylistically from Cosway as the two pictures are united in sentiment. Painted during a period when mothers were exhorted to more intimate relationships with their children, these late-eighteenth-century portraits represent a very different attitude toward childhood than that seen in Anthony van Dyck’s early-seventeenth-century Portrait of a Woman and Child, in which the child is dressed stiffly as an adult and receives only a hint of physical intimacy from the mother (fig. 2). Although he painted many miniatures of children, portraits of mothers with their children are relatively rare within Cosway’s oeuvre.

CORY KORKOW