

Olympia's Clothes

Compellingly cute and enchanting, the clothes of a baby embody the innocence of childhood, the magic of growth, the miracle of physical development and burgeoning awareness. Compared to adult clothing, the clothes of a baby are easily exoticized, for they reflect the 'clean slate' of infant psychology, a primitive condition of having neither class- nor race-consciousness and seeming therefore an ideal site for projecting bourgeois fantasies of primal desire at its prettiest, an unattainable earthiness in a condition of exquisite charm, a parcelling of fundamental human urges in an ideal phase of convenient powerlessness.

As baby clothes are such a lovable commodity, they are also given to proliferation. The exotic joy of baby beauty is well recognized by global manufacturers and is served by innumerable rites of giving. Just as babies do not understand the word 'no', so their parents and admiring relatives can never deny an excess of consumption; for this would be a transgressive abnegation of infant instincts, a dereliction of expected wholeheartedness, a parsimonious wrongness nastily threatening the sympathy for baby with puritanical morality. Furthermore, the enthusiasm for purchasing seems justified by the implacable growth of the little one, making half the purchases of two months ago obsolete. All extravagance is vindicated by the great celebration of growth. It is as if any waste is only construed as a necessary sacrifice for heralding and propitiating the expected outgrowing: the rituals of superabundant giving are the child's essential sacrament, carrying firmer belief than any baptismal ceremony of organized religion.

So the parents, relatives and close friends-no matter what income group-submit to continuing pressure to enlarge the wardrobe of tiny vests, tights, jackets, skirts, slippers, trousers, dresses, sunhats, gloves, blankets, berets, pyjamas, socks, scarves, overcoats, pillow cases, skivvies, bibs, T-shirts, jump suits, pilchers, body-suits, shoes, jumpers, sandals, bumper sets. Bag-fulls of it can be set aside each quarter. They cannot be worn again. Perhaps they can be used for another baby. Perhaps not. They are a soft industrial offering to nature. Perhaps the disused pieces are slightly melancholy, a sanctuary of the previous stage, vanitas in a plastic bag.

The prodigality of spending on baby clothes seems to transcend class. Nobody's baby should ever look poor but should evoke dynastic capital. No matter how much debt under which the family struggles, that baby should not be inferior in dress to any Infanta in the gilded halls of the Prado. All babies have to be baroque. When they venture forth in the Emmaljunga pram, they should be worthy of Velázquez or Rubens. Spectacle is their element. Spectacle that comes in racks in all shopping centres, shelves in their thousands... And all for projecting the love of baby. It is a vanity that everyone deplores and celebrates at the same time. Behold the diminutive sociology of *lurv*.

Olympia's Clothes is a mural-size grid of 135 small photographs in which Polixeni Papapetrou has visually itemized the wardrobe of her two year-old daughter, Olympia. Each image is a faithful record of an object, soon to be outgrown and passed on. The items are photographed in a somewhat systematic way, with a similar flat light. The idiom desists from all monumentality and authorial pomp. There are no demonstrative folds or attempts to suggest moods or to narrate implicit episodes. Careful inspection will reveal that the clothes have not been laid out flat for their 'portrait' but have been pinned up on a vertical plane to allow gravity to draw the textiles into a natural conformation.

The expressiveness of their whole is therefore not derived from that sense of anecdote which parental affection stimulates. The collection-soon to be dispersed-has been gathered in a spirit between fondness and objectivity; it is a catalogue of ingenuous matter-of-factness, detailing the miniature costumes with the same sense of order and neatness by which they were regularly washed, ironed, folded and returned to their rightful place in the drawer.

While looking at certain items in the quaint archive, it is hard not to see a little body figuratively filling out the design. And in spite of their lack of photographic accent or mannerism, many items of clothing seem to be animated with a spooky immanence, as if Olympia's presence were somehow embodied in them. The fussy parent is also intimated in the composition of the assembly, as shapes and colours play off against one another with the same formal scrupulosity that parents use in matching top, bottom, shoes and socks.

Although the selection of clothes suggests a catalogue, there is no taxonomy, either by size, provenance, function, gender-inscriptions, class-symbolism or quality. The clothes are arrayed in an almost confessional comprehensiveness; there is no hierarchy within them and no attempt to declare an ideology of dressing a daughter. Some items are exaggeratedly feminine while countless others are equally suitable for a boy of today's sumptuary conventions. The overwhelming impression of the grid is its volume of sweet little items. So many things for a child who has had so little time for amassing property!

Since 1995 (in the exhibition *The First Age*), Papapetrou has been artistically investigating the status of children in contemporary consciousness. Having a child or her own has undoubtedly added a kind of urgency to her speculations-for now she has to be the author of a child's symbolic presence and can no longer be a disinterested spectator-but it has also caused her to reach back into anterior archives, to reflect on the rarefied children of art history with which our own children share remarkable characteristics.

In *Infant-Infanta*, Papapetrou juxtaposes an image of Olympia at c.10 months with two paintings by Velázquez from the mid seventeenth century, the *Infanta Margarita* and the *Infanta Maria Teresa*. The title *Infant-Infanta* immediately calls upon us to compare the English and Spanish terms, the rather clinical-sounding 'infant' and the exotic and aristocratic *infanta*. The English language is more etymologically correct than Spanish in understanding by the word 'infant' a child who cannot yet speak (Latin, *infans*, not speaking). We tend to say that a child who talks grammatically is no longer an infant. In Spanish, the word was long used as a royal title, irrespective of the speaking ability of the child, just as the French do with their *enfant*. But unlike the French word, the Spanish is highly institutional, evoking all the inaccessible wealth and privilege of baroque authority.

Had Papapetrou combined the *Infantas* with a snap-shot image of Olympia, the

historical pomp of high-born children would have been sardonically denounced in its obsolescence. Beside a cheery pink bub, say, with face besmeared with vegemite and threatened by eczema, the Infantas would have seemed humiliated by the anachronism of their nobility. Instead, her image of Olympia is a highly constructed tableau, bestowing upon the infant-correctly named-the artificial dignity of gloomy dowager, an empress-cadet with imperious brow and a rattle like a sceptre. She floats in a staged black artistic photo-space, with her only company being an embroidered cushion with pretensions to Leonardo's sultry picture in the Louvre.

With Infant-Infanta Papapetrou adds the only confession that may not be made through *Olympia's Clothes*: no matter how much the comparison between the bourgeois and the regal may be ridiculous, the aspiration to aristocratic status for one's children holds a place in the psyche with tenacious supremacy. We buy, we strive, we hoard, we hope, we dream, we joke. And with all this, what is the reality? In fact, our children are in many ways more fortunate than baroque princes; they are surely healthier, possibly more nourished by parental affection and certainly better flattered by clothes and objects than were the young of the ruling classes at any time in history.

Looking at the children in the museums induces strange feelings about what money can afford for children. Children have little vanity and can seldom enjoy the pretensions in which we clothe them. They stage our projections with either a melancholy submission or a subversive version of pride, barely able to conceal their naughtiness and caprice. But in viewing the ironic gallery of noble juniors, the only mistake would be to assume that we can do without such constructs of childhood, that there is a clean slate somewhere, an innocent way of seeing and picturing a child, unmediated by parental ambition, fantasy or irony. With strong reservations, Papapetrou's work finally capitulates to this appreciation. Today, we do the aristocratic thing with mass-consumption; we cultivate dignity and joy with what we earn and what we are given. But what else should we do? To have children is to buy into this economy. You accept it and find it propitious for loving your children. And every parent will tell you: in the end, that is all that counts.

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