

IDEAS FOR INQUIRY:
"EXHIBITING
CHILDREN"

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Think about it—while scholars of children's folklore typically report the identification, collection, organization, and interpretation of children's traditions, they also must be aware of the variety of ways that this material is adapted, displayed, even misrepresented, in museums, publications, festivals, web sites, community centers, and classrooms. What are the images of tradition projected of children and childhood in various media? The Children's Folklore Section of the American Folklore Society sponsored a special forum to take up this provocative theme of "exhibiting children" at the 2002 annual meeting in Rochester, New York. Conference attendees had the opportunity before the forum to visit the Margaret Strong Museum (including the National Toy Hall of Fame), renowned for its children's material culture collections (see <http://www.strongmuseum.org>). The opening ceremony of the conference was held in the museum. Recognizing discussions of the visual representation and cultural construction of childhood in various disciplines, Children's Folklore Section leaders C. W. Sullivan III and JoAnn Conrad working with Robert Baron of the New York State Council on the Arts organized the forum as a way to bring this issue to a wider audience of folklorists and museum professionals.

I introduced the concept of the forum this way:

Children rarely have control of their own representation, and yet the exhibition of childhood is usually a key to the understanding of the inheritance of culture from one generation to the next. Considering the public debate revolving around the decline of traditional values passed along to children, the hegemonic structures of consumer cultures dictating children's lives, the vulnerability, and danger, of children, and the proliferation of alternative children's subcultures in America, the forum addresses what impact the exhibition of children in media, education, and museums has had on the representations of children's culture, especially folk culture. It necessarily takes up the difference between material and visual ex-

hibitions presented by children and adults. These central questions lead with oral and social genres while popular culture has exhibited the material and visual realm. Against the backdrop of exhibitions and collections of childhood by the Strong Museum, the panel suggests new intellectual directions that can place folklore at the center of scholarly discourse on children, family, and youth as the key to cultural analysis.

One such intellectual direction begins at the museum, gallery, and cultural agency interpreting children's artifacts for the public. Jon Paul Dyson, historian at the Margaret Strong Museum, explained the background of Margaret Strong's collecting and the museum's work in building a cultural interpretation of the collections (see <http://www.strongmuseum.org/collection/index.htm>). The emphasis has been on the historical development of children's culture, and Dyson offered insights into the implications of comparing contemporary practice with Victorian children's culture. While the Victorian sensibility was on accumulation of artifacts, contemporary practice calls for themes that suggest the meaning of children's lives. The themes presented to exhibit children are: House and Home, Ideas and Images, Clothing and Accessories, Play and Work, Sight and Sound. The Museum explains the collection this way:

These artifacts embody, illustrate, illuminate, preserve, and enable understanding of the attitudes, beliefs, values, customs, tastes, and traditions that Americans have held individually and collectively over the last two centuries and have passed, or are passing, to subsequent generations. These personal, everyday objects help Americans to understand who they are and who they believe they are and why.

C.W. Sullivan III, professor of English at East Carolina University and editor of the *Children's Folklore Review*, discussed what he and some others perceive as the passing of spontaneous play. Children's traditional play, especially the songs and games that folklorists have collected since W.W. Newell's *Games and Songs of American Children*, published in 1884, has long been a central concern of children's folklorists. The songs and games that have, in the not-so-recent past, been collected from children at recess, before and after school, in the neighborhood in the afternoon or evening may soon no longer be available as recess disappears from the elementary school schedule, children are signed up for after-school sports, arts, or academic pro

grams, and homework for even first graders becomes the primary activity of the evening. In short, children are losing (or having taken away from them) the opportunity to exhibit themselves in game and song. As that happens, is there any way a museum can exhibit games and songs in any way other than photographs and written texts?

Peter Tokofsky, associate professor at UCLA, addressed the dissonance between exhibition of and experience of celebrations from the perspective of children. Whereas museums tend to display the sacred or special objects associated with these occasions, he pointed out, his observations participating in a "Family Traditions: Linking Individuals to Cultures" project in Los Angeles, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, marked objects for memory, which are ultimately not suitable for most museum displays. It might be the foods, spontaneous games, or other ephemera, which serve as the highlights of celebratory occasions for children.

Jeannie Thomas, associate professor of English and folklore at Utah State University (see <http://english.usu.edu/americanstudies/thomas.html>) discussed the ways that children perform and exhibit Barbie dolls, the world's most popular doll. Thomas's interest in the effects of Barbie on popular culture was stimulated by narratives elicited from students in a children's folklore course. One student recalled collecting Barbie heads and baking them in the oven. Another posed Barbie and Ken dolls in idealistic "Theodore (Beaver) Cleaver" tableaux when dysfunctional family interaction became too disturbing or painful. For all the controversy and problems surrounding Barbie, she maintains her popularity. Thomas said she believes Barbie encourages creative play, which has helped Mattel become a part of contemporary folk culture. The variety of Barbies on the market enforces the connection she has with folklore and culture. "I was struck at how Mattel commodifies folklore and sells it. There are Barbies for holidays, fairy tales, even international Barbies. Folklore studies places and culture, and Mattel markets that in a really superficial way," said Thomas (see http://www.hardnewscafe.usu.edu/archive/july2000/0720_barbie.html).

The lively response from the audience signaled many of the perspectives opened up by the theme of "exhibiting children." A number of participants remarked on the representation of children's folklore in classroom materials available for basic education. Other participants picked up on the tension between commercial culture in the marketing of toys and folk culture in the performances of children with toys. This led to a lively debate over the hegemonic effect that commercial culture has over the folk practices of children. The past-orientation of

museums also received scrutiny, and discussion ensued on incorporating ethnographic documentation of contemporary culture, or children's views of their own culture, in museums and cultural exhibitions. The session brought out the ways that children's folklore scholarship is an act of representation and construction. In so doing, participants realized the ethical implications of the adaptation of scholarship in various media.