

The four children- augustine esteve



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Four Children by Augustine Esteve About a month ago, I made a visit to the San Antonio Museum of Art. The museum offered a huge array of pieces and exhibits. After spending a fun filled two hours combing through the museum's awesome collections (Btw, I enjoyed the amulets and relics in the glass exhibits tremendously!), there were three pieces which made quite an impression on me. I left thinking how do I choose from the best of three—each having the power to intrigue or move me in some way.

I felt a definite connection with each of the pieces. The piece I ended up choosing was on the 4th floor in the European Section. It was a painting by Agustin Esteve entitled Four Children. It is oil on canvas, 97 inches by 23 inches, and was painted in the late 18th century. When I first came by this painting, I tried to avoid reading the label on it, so that I could try and understand the piece before I allowed someone else to inform my perspective. I remember feeling a sense of mysticism to it when I first seen it.

The painting depicts four children in a dark woody area. There appears to be a fog behind them. The child in the middle is dressed in all black with a bird in his hand. The piece seemed to evoke fear in me at first (I am still not sure why!) Perhaps it was the colors and tones which helped to create that unsettling feeling(dramatic effect). Right off, I noticed the lines used were soft and smooth, like Renoir employs in his paintings/portraits. The emphasis was on the children in the center of the picture.

My first impression was that the kids were lost somewhere and very afraid, but that idea did not mesh well with me because one the boys seemed to

cling to him, while the other stared off into the distance with no emotion in his eyes, and he seemed to be leading the boy away with his eyes. Off to the far right is a young girl dressed in her Sunday best, with a flower and black pendant in her left hand and a ribbon on her chest. The description of the painting explained that the young man dressed in black is dead and this painting is of his memory, and then the painting started to make sense.

I became more drawn in to it. The bird in his hand is a European Goldfinch which is a symbol of the departed spirit. He is being ushered away from this world into the after- life by the two boys. The girl to the far right is the boy's sister, and she looks very terrified in light of the passing of her brother. She has an oval relicario which contains a lock of her dead brother's hair. The black bow she has on indicates that she is in mourning. The background is completely dark with the combined usage of blacks and grays making the trees and sky undistinguishable at times.

With regards to the dead boy's attire—he is clothed in full black garments. The other children are portrayed with pale / ruby red skin. Their clothes are well lit too. Even the dead boy's face is bright (probably the palest of everybody). Because Agustin made the background so dark it is hard to distinguish where the floor really is, it seems as though they are floating in air. Agustin Esteve was famous for his life like portraits especially those of children. The expression on the dead boy's face is compelling.

It is a serious, haunting, very afraid look that made an impression on me. This young boy's expression of fear is visceral and cathartic, and I feel sorry for both -himself and his sister. I chose this painting because of the '

delicate' subject matter and how it dealt with children. This is Perfect Realism type painting depicting intense inner emotion. Also known as art of perfect likeness. The artist employs a fully frontal two point perspective system—this helps to focus my attention on the little boy who succumbed to death.

The other elements in the painting, by way of line of sight created by the glance of the two kids leading him by his arm, draws attention to him. The boy's overlapping arm on the girl to the right of him creates the illusion that he is front of her making the boy seem closer to the viewer. The artist has composed a closed space because my attention stays transfixed on the center of the canvas. The space employed creates tension(girl on his right and little sister at his feet.) The artist manages well to capture emotional complexity in his subjects faces.

In terms of balance of light and dark in the picture, the artist skillfully represents the transition from dark to light—in a type of Chiasroscuro(contrast between light and shadow), the characters stand against an artificial light which appears to be a fog cast against the pitch darkness, the children's faces fall into this zone of light in this transitory and fleeting moment. The colors Augustine preferred using was dull and somber which worked in harmony with the dark and dreary background. The colors also underscored the moment of truth well, also it created the right amount of emotional intensity.

The color symbolism of black denotes death. The visual texture is smooth and even. It is an oil painting on canvas, it look like the oil painting may have

been combined with linseed oil or mineral spirit used in general and the idea is to create a thinner rack. The idea here was thin almost chiffon or gossamer looking garments for the girls, the boy's garments appear to be of a thicker fabric—charcoal black oil paint. The blending and layering can be seen in the girls outfits. This could have been Rembrandt oil which permits stunning effects of light and color as well as much greater realism as can be seen in this painting.

It looks like this painting may typically have started out with a charcoal or chalk drawing over which he built up the paint in layers, taking care to ensure that each layer applied contained a little more oil than the last in order to facilitate drying and prevent flaking. Numerous additives (eg. waxes, resins, varnishes) may have been mixed with the paint to vary its luminosity, sheen and other properties like its capacity to conceal brushstrokes. In oil paintings, initial drying can take up to a year or more, after which a resin or wax varnish can be applied.

Museum curators do not consider oil paintings to be thoroughly dry until several decades have passed. Texture in this type of painting is also enhanced through repetition of shape and line. This composition also tends to be asymmetrically balanced, but even so your eye still moves to the central person who is the boy, in other words the emphasis and focal point is the boy. Even though there are elements besides this boy, they do not distract from the point of vision. They do however, contribute to the overall effect of being his escorts ushering him away, and your eye stays on the focal path to consider the moment.

They either dressed in light colored garments, so as to not compete for the viewers attention, or simply dressed in light colored, airy clothes symbolic of being angelic, the little sister's dress is also a light color, showing unity in elements. She stares into a space with a look that sees she is terrified, but also like she sees something out there. It is an intense transitory moment. Low contrast exists between colors which helps with the harmony and flow. The children's pretty porcelain complexions stand out most against the dark background, but again it is not too sharp a contrast.

This is a lovely painting easy to appreciate because the subject chosen was that of children, albeit it was of a sad nature. It was very engaging, not only for its formal elements, but also because of the story it told. Agustin Esteve was a portraitist to the Spanish Crown, who was influenced by Francisco Goya, including numerous copies of portraits by the great master. Esteve was born in Valencia, in the province of the same name, on the 12 May 1753, possibly the son of a Valencian sculptor also named Agustin Esteve. He grew up in Valencia and studied at the Academia de Bellas Artes de San Carlos in that city.

In 1772 he won a first prize in the third class in the Painting department for a drawing at Madrid's Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando. In 1778, Esteve failed to win the first prize at the Academia de San Fernando for painting. Like Goya, Esteve became established when the neoclassicism of Anton Raphael Mengs was still dominant in Madrid. However, in the late 18th century, Esteve came under Goya's influence, as well. There is not a lot of information about Esteve's works on the internet, in fact there is nothing out there that explains anything about The Four Children.

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However, there is a plethora of info out there about Francisco Goya who was Esteve's mentor. But I have noticed that in one of Goya's paintings entitled Manuel Osorio Manrique de Zuniga (1784-1792), he painted the little boy posthumously. The boy was the son of the Count and Countess of Altamira. The little boy is shown playing with a magpie. He uses the bird to symbolize the soul just like Esteve used the Goldfinch in his painting. It seems as though Esteve has not deviated from Goya's style in representation. Like Manuel Osorio, the Four Children may also have been executed after the boy's death.