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March 27, 2019

The Dolls and Daughters of Frank Weston Benson

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
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Art History

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Abstract

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Between 1903 and 1910, the Boston artist Frank Weston Benson and his daughters Eleanor and Sylvia created a collection of paper dolls. Together with Benson's portraits of his daughters, these dolls help illuminate the artist's understanding of the proper roles of American women in upper middle-class society. While the collaborative production allowed Benson's daughters the opportunity to express their creativity, the collection's family format and fashion options define the limits of the feminine realm. As didactic tools, Benson's paper-doll set prepared his daughters for their future stations, both in their families and their careers as artists.

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Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to Dr. Linda Merrill for her unwavering support and guidance throughout the duration of this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Cynthia Blakeley and Dr. Sarah McPhee for serving as my committee members. Emory's Undergraduate Research Programs graciously provided financial support that allowed me to travel to the Phillips Library in Massachusetts to conduct archival research. The staff at the High Museum of Art and Smith College's Special Collections Libraries as well as Benson scholar Faith Andrews Bedford all provided invaluable assistance throughout the research portion of this project. Finally, I would also like to thank Sophia Ellingham, who has continued to help me with my homework since the fifth grade, even though we currently live in different states, and my parents for their constant support and encouragement.

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The Dolls and Daughters of Frank Weston Benson

Introduction

Locked away in a storeroom in the High Museum of Art is a collection of paper dolls identified as the “Colton Family.” The Coltons and their extensive wardrobe comprise well over two hundred objects, all attributed to the American impressionist painter Frank Weston Benson (1862 – 1951). The collection dates to between 1903 and 1910, the period in which Benson created his best-known works, plein-air portraits of his daughters Eleanor, Elisabeth, and Sylvia, and many of the dolls’ outfits even resemble the clothing worn by the girls in the family portraits. While there are notable connections between the paper dolls and Benson’s impressionist paintings, the “Colton Collection” has yet to be studied in depth, perhaps because the dolls fall within the realm of decorative arts, a field that art historians have historically neglected. When studied as toys, however, the functional attributes of Benson’s paper dolls offer clues to the artist’s complex conception of girlhood, as toys are used not only for entertainment but also as didactic tools to prepare children for their future stations in society. Because Benson’s dolls take the form of a white, upper middle-class family much like his own, we may infer that Benson hoped his dolls would teach his daughters about the values and responsibilities they would assume as young women. The Coltons can be understood to represent Benson’s conception of an ideal family, and by studying this collection in the context of Benson’s own family portraits, we can begin to understand the artist’s beliefs concerning the proper roles for young women at the turn of the twentieth century.

A Brief Benson Biography

Frank Weston Benson was born in Salem, Massachusetts, the oldest son and second child of George Wiggins Benson, a successful cotton merchant, and Elisabeth Poole. His parents sought to provide every opportunity for their children to learn and experiment and develop their own intellectual and creative talents. In addition to attending Salem's rigorous public schools, Frank Benson and his siblings regularly joined their parents for evening lectures at the Athenaeum, the Lyceum, and the Essex Institute. The children also took dance classes and music lessons; Frank Benson, in particular, learned to play the banjo. Along with these varied academic and social pursuits, George and Elisabeth Benson stressed the importance of physical activity and encouraged their children to engage in sports such as tennis and boxing. They also urged their children to spend their free time outdoors and provided each one with a small sailboat and the boys with equipment for fishing and hunting.¹

It was during a successful hunt in 1878 that Frank Benson was first inspired to try his hand at oil painting. Nailing his catch, two snipes, to the barn door to ripen, sixteen-year-old Benson picked up his palette and painted the works *Rail* (Private Collection) and *Snipe* (Private Collection). This first foray into realism altered the course of Benson's life; while most young men in Salem followed in their fathers' footsteps and joined the merchant-shipping business, Benson decided to become an artist. His father was not initially pleased with this decision and worried about his son's future finances, but Benson's mother, an amateur artist, advocated on her

¹ Faith Andrews Bedford, "Frank W. Benson: A Bibliography," in *Frank W. Benson: A Retrospective* (New York: Berry-Hill Galleries, Inc., 1989), 15,18.

son's behalf and convinced her husband to allow Frank to attend the newly founded School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.²

In 1880 Benson began his studies in Boston, where he met several of the artists who were to become his lifelong friends and associates. Among his closest companions were Willard Metcalf (1858-1925), Edmund C. Tarbell (1862-1938), and Joseph Lindon Smith (1863-1950). Together, these young men studied a traditional curriculum of classical sculpture, the old masters, and anatomy under the guidance of the German portraitist Otto Grundmann (1844-1890). In their free time, Benson and his peers explored the multitude of local art galleries. Following the conventions of the period, they each also studied for some time in Europe. Benson embarked on his European adventure in 1883, after his parents gave him a ticket



Fig. 1. Frank Weston Benson, *Paris Parade*, 1885. Oil on Canvas, 12 1/2 X 7 9/16 in. Private Collection.

to Paris and one thousand dollars for his twenty-first birthday.³ He traveled with Joseph Lindon Smith, and together they enrolled in the popular Académie Julian. While Benson's French training primarily focused on realistically portraying the human figure, it was during this period that he was introduced to impressionism. In fact, he painted his first impressionist work, a small painting titled *Paris Parade* (Fig. 1), in 1885. He would not fully adopt this style, however, until several years after returning to Boston.

Benson's time in France not only shaped his style and the course of his career but also impacted his private life. While spending the summer of 1884 in the town of Concarneau in

² Faith Andrews Bedford, *Frank W. Benson: American Impressionist* (New York: Rizzoli International, 1994), 17-18.

³ *Ibid.*, 21.

Normandy, Benson reconnected with Ellen Peirson (1860-1954), his older sister Georgie's best friend. Peirson, along with her mother and sister, had traveled to France to embark on a European grand tour, but they quickly changed their plans upon joining Benson and his artist companions. Not only did the Peirson women spend the entire summer in Concarneau, but they also decided to follow the artists back to Paris for the winter. During this time, Ellen Peirson and Frank Benson became close and regularly enjoyed each other's company, taking in the sights and sounds of France. Benson even painted a portrait of Ellen in 1884 (*Portrait of Ellen Peirson*, Private Collection), foreshadowing the course of his career: after returning to the United States, he regularly drew inspiration from the women in his life and garnered critical acclaim for his paintings of his and Ellen's three daughters. When the Peirsons finally left France to continue their travels, Ellen and Benson stayed in touch through letters, and upon Benson's return to the United States in 1885, they became engaged. The couple would not wed, however, until October 17, 1888, when Benson was finally able to provide for his new wife and future family.⁴

Upon returning to the United States, Benson initially planned to support himself, and later his family, by painting portraits in Salem. Unfortunately, he received few commissions and needed to look for a more stable, salaried position.⁵ In 1887 he accepted a job serving two five-month terms as a teacher at the newly founded Portland (Maine) Society of Art. Then, in the summer of 1889, Benson secured a long-term teaching position at his Boston alma mater. His appointment to the School of the Museum of Fine Arts profoundly impacted the Boston art scene, as he and his friend and colleague Edmund C. Tarbell encouraged their students to adapt the French impressionist style to paintings of beautiful women in genteel interiors. Ultimately,

⁴ Bedford, "Frank W. Benson," 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

Benson and Tarbell's curriculum led to the founding of a group of like-minded artists that came to be called the Boston School.

Frank and Ellen Benson were grateful for the financial stability provided by Frank's new position because their family was quickly expanding. Their first child, Eleanor, was born on January 30, 1890. Benson's life suddenly

became extremely busy, as he divided his time between teaching, his young family, and his rapidly increasing popularity in the art world.

His paternal duties continued to increase with the birth of his son, George, in 1891, and his second daughter, Elisabeth, in 1892. Sylvia, the Bensons' youngest child, joined the brood in

1898. One way in which Benson seems to have balanced his duties as a father with his artistic ambition was by persuading his children to

pose for his paintings. These portraits were primarily painted during the summers, which

the family spent on the small island of North Haven, Maine. Eleanor alone posed for over twenty portraits throughout her childhood and adolescence. Benson's children were not always eager to work as models, however, and George, in particular, struck a bargain with his father to be paid fifteen cents an hour to pose.⁶

Regardless of the means by which Benson compelled his children to participate in his artistic pursuits, the family papers reveal that Benson, much like his own parents, actively



Fig. 2. Frank Weston Benson, *Calm Morning*, 1904. Oil on canvas, 44 $\frac{3}{8}$ X 36 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. Museum of Fine Arts Boston; Gift of the Charles A. Coolidge Family. 1985.925.

⁶ Ibid., 55.

engaged with his children and provided them with numerous educational opportunities. A journal that he and his family kept during their summers at Wooster Farm in North Haven attests to the fact that Benson regularly joined his children on such excursions as afternoon picnics and fishing trips, as depicted in Benson's painting *Calm Morning* (Fig. 2); in 1908, he even allowed his children to briefly convert his barn studio into a squash court. More generally, this family journal demonstrates that Benson kept track of his children's favorite pastimes and closest friends.⁷ In an era when fathers were viewed primarily as providers, especially in white, upper middle-class households, Benson appears to have disregarded societal stereotypes concerning his role as patriarch.⁸ In an 1895 letter to his brother, who had recently had a child, Benson even alludes to the fact that he often stayed up all hours of the night to take care of his own infants' needs.⁹ Other letters written to Eleanor during her time at Smith College and continuing after her graduation in 1910 and marriage in 1913 show how Benson remained interested in his daughter's academic pursuits, personal fitness, and social affairs over the years.¹⁰ The letters further emphasize the fact that Benson consistently encouraged, nurtured, and guided his children's development from infancy to adulthood.

Frank Weston Benson's actions as a parent at the turn of the twentieth century evidence his willingness to redefine the roles of a father, as he appears to have been comfortable in the stereotypically feminine domestic sphere. His collection of paper dolls provides proof that Benson engaged his daughters in forms of play customarily assigned to women and girls. His ability to combine his artistic practice with his family life allowed him to successfully navigate

⁷ Frank Benson and family, "Wooster Farm," typescript extracts from MS journals, 1907–11, North Haven Maine Historical Society (hereinafter "Wooster Farm"), pp. 4-9.

⁸ Maxine P. Atkinson and Stephen P. Blackwelder, "Fathering in the 20th Century," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 55, no. 4 (November 1993): 976, 981. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/352777>

⁹ Benson to John Prentiss Benson, February 21, 1895, Series I:A, MSS 324, Frank Weston Benson Papers, The Phillips Library at the Peabody Essex Museum (hereinafter Benson Papers).

¹⁰ Benson to Eleanor Benson., January 14, 1907 – September 14, 1917, Series I:A, Benson Papers.

between the domestic and social spheres and to embody the role of a well-rounded family man. This type of paternal figure was not an entirely new development in American culture: historically, men have more easily moved between the public and private spheres than women. In *A Republic of Men* (1998), Mark E. Kann explains that even the American founders emphasized the virtues of the family man, such as his “self-restraint and caring for posterity [that] qualified him as a trustworthy man and deserving citizen.”¹¹ Benson’s close relationships with his children and invested interest in their education and social development may have been uncommon, therefore, for an upper middle-class father at the turn of the century, but his attitude was not unprecedented.

While Benson appears to have been comfortable with his own engagement in the domestic realm, it is uncertain whether he believed that women, including his daughters, should be allowed the same access to the public sphere. The early twentieth century was a period of immense social change, especially for women of the upper middle-class, who were increasingly in the public eye. More and more young women were enrolling in college, joining the workforce, and engaging in organizations that addressed social and political issues such as temperance and women’s suffrage. As the father of three girls, Benson would have found it impossible to remain indifferent to the contemporary question of the proper roles for women and girls in society. Furthermore, as a painter of girlhood scenes during this period, Benson sometimes allows his personal views to surface in his works, as becomes evident when they are compared to earlier and contemporary girlhood scenes painted by other artists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The poses, props, and environments in Benson’s portraits of his daughters provide

¹¹ Mark E. Kann, “The American Founders, Gendered Language, and Patriarchal Politics,” in *A Republic of Men* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 80.

clues to the values and skills that Benson believed Eleanor, Elisabeth, and Sylvia needed to cultivate to assume their proper roles as adults.

Girlhood in American Painting

As a painter of girlhood scenes, Frank Benson found critical success by embracing a genre that first captured the American public's attention in the mid-nineteenth century. As early as the 1830s, American artists such as William Sidney Mount (1807-1868) painted scenes of young boys, but it was not until two decades later, on the eve of the Civil War, that artists began to create narrative and genre scenes that focused on girls. During the antebellum era of increasing political uncertainty, idyllic images of an apparently innocent childhood provided solace for the American middle class,

and as art historian

Holly Pyne Connor

points out, scenes of

girlhood in particular

encapsulated “the

perceived security and

comfort of home and its

female inhabitants.”¹²

Prior to this period, the

depiction of girls was

primarily limited to

portraiture, and even then, most portraits of young girls were commissioned by their families.

Artists were therefore required to present these children in an idealized manner that emphasized



Fig. 3. William Sidney Mount, *Dance of the Haymakers*, 1845. Oil on Canvas, 24 X 29 ¾ in. Long Island Museum; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ward Melville, 1950. 000.001.0019.

¹² Holly Pyne Connor, “The Flowering of Girlhood Narratives, 1850-1870,” in *Angels & Tomboys: Girlhood in 19th-Century American Art*, ed. Holly Pyne Connor (San Francisco: Pomegranate Communications, Inc., 2012), 11.

their virtues and pleased their parents and were rarely allowed the artistic freedom to portray them in more unaffected, natural attitudes. On the rare occasion that a girl did appear in a genre scene prior to 1850, as in William Sidney Mount's *Dance of the Haymakers* (Fig. 3), she was often pushed to the edges of the scene, taking her marginalized place beside women and African Americans. It would take a female artist, Lilly Martin Spencer (1822-1902), to popularize the genre of narrative girlhood scenes.¹³

In the mid-nineteenth century, women artists who desired to exhibit, print, and distribute their works faced many limitations when it came to choosing subjects that society deemed appropriate. Painting children, who resided in the domestic sphere, was considered one of the few suitable options.¹⁴ These artists could draw from their personal experience as mothers and caretakers and present the charming and sometimes humorous aspects of childhood



Fig. 4. Lilly Martin Spencer, *See How the Sun Shines*, c. 1855-1858. Oil on canvas, 36 X 28 ⁴/₅ in. Private Collection.

that would appeal to other women in similar positions. Lilly Martin Spencer's depictions of girlhood, exemplified by *See How the Sun Shines* (Fig. 4), proved to be extremely popular and lucrative during this period. It seems likely that her marked commercial success influenced artists such as Eastman Johnson (1824-1906), William Morris Hunt (1824-1879), and John

¹³ Ibid., 12-13.

¹⁴ Anne Higonnet, "Pictures We Like to Look At," in *Children in Art: A Century of Change*, ed. Curtis L. Carter (Milwaukee: The Patrick and Beatrice Haggarty Museum of Art, Marquette University, 1999), 41-42.

George Brown (1831-1913), who began painting girlhood scenes in the late 1850s and early 1860s, when reproductions of Spencer's popular works were being published.

Spencer's own narrative paintings, such as *Will You Have Some Fruit?* (Fig. 5), exemplify the girlhood themes commonly represented at this time. As Claire Perry explains in *Young America: Childhood in 19th Century Art and Culture*, the majority of nineteenth-century artists adhered to a relatively narrow range of girlhood subjects, including "girls gathering flowers, playing with



Fig. 5. Lilly Martin Spencer, *Will You Have Some Fruit?* 1871. Oil on canvas, 34 X 42 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. Private Collection.

activities that represented the routines of home life," prefiguring their roles as wives and mothers. *Will You Have Some Fruit?* also recalls the common trope of comparing a young girl to a caged song bird: both are typically described as pretty and sweet, but they are confined to their homes and dependent on others for sustenance. In this painting, Spencer slightly subverts the typical narrative, as the young girl is shown providing for her avian counterpart, whose cage door is open, suggesting that both child and bird have more autonomy than might be expected. The modified narrative may be due to the fact that *Will You Have Some Fruit?* is one of Spencer's later works, created after the conclusion of the Civil War. Nevertheless, the props and setting of the painting are typical of works from the 1850s and 1860s. In general, girlhood paintings from this period, even the occasional humorous depiction of misbehaving girls, were cast to express, as Perry points out, "the taming and domestication girls underwent as part of

their transition to womanhood.”¹⁵ These pictorial types reinforced a sense of familiarity and routine, suggesting that even though the Civil War was dramatically reshaping the nation’s political and geographic landscape, the status quo remained stable at home.

These unvarying paintings and prints, however, depicted an idealized concept of girlhood and domestic life, for in reality, the war had permeated the feminine sphere. Thousands of women assisted the war effort on both fronts, serving as nurses, providing resources such as food and clothing, and organizing fundraising campaigns. The proximity of the war forced women to take more active roles and stay apprised of political events. Girls raised in this turbulent period had less free time for leisure activities such as embroidery or picking flowers. In the absence of their fathers and brothers, they were given new responsibilities at home and consequently gained a degree of social freedom.

Even after the Civil War concluded in 1865, many women and girls continued to work outside the home. The American economy expanded as the nation became ever-more urban and industrial. While some upper-class girls may have spent their childhoods in serene, pastoral settings, a significant number of lower- and middle-class girls and young women went to work in factories to help support their families. Girls, therefore, were far more active in the public sphere during the period of Reconstruction, and as Lauren Lessing explains in “Roses in Bloom: American Images of Adolescent Girlhood,” their newfound public visibility inspired an increasing number of paintings that featured girls and young women. Winslow Homer’s *Old Mill* (Fig. 6), for example, shows a young woman dressed in bright red, holding a lunch pail and walking over a wooden bridge. The bell has summoned her to work at the factory just beyond the left edge of the painting. Though her environment is rural, she is dressed fashionably when

¹⁵ Claire Perry, *Young America: Childhood in 19th Century Art and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 38, 67.

compared to the women huddled together on the right: she represents the new, independent and self-sufficient woman of the 1870s. The increasing social freedom of these modern young



Fig. 6. Winslow Homer, *Old Mill*, 1871. Oil on canvas, 24 X 38 1/8 in. Yale University Art Gallery; Bequest of Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903. 1961.18.26.

women also contributed to a new vision of the prototypical American girl. The “passive, innocent, and ethereal child,” Lessing explains, was steadily replaced by the “plucky, flirtatious, and athletic” youth, as seen in John George Brown’s *Swinging on the Gate* (Fig. 7) and *Not in It* (Fig. 8).¹⁶

While societal change reshaped the depiction of girls in paintings, modern art movements such as impressionism and urban realism, which dominated American art at the turn of the century, modified the formal aspects of girlhood scenes. Anne Higonnet explains that the

¹⁶ Lauren Lessing, “Roses in Bloom: American Images of Adolescent Girlhood,” in *Angels & Tomboys*, 117, 129.



Fig. 7. John George Brown, *Swinging on the Gate*, c. 1878-1879. Oil on canvas, 22 $\frac{1}{4}$ X 14 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. Taubman Museum of Art; Acquired with funds provided by the Horace G. Fralin Charitable Trust. 2003.003.



Fig. 8. John George Brown, *Not in It*, n.d. Oil on canvas, 28 X 38 in. Private Collection.

sentimental girlhood pictures from the Civil War era lost their critical appeal in the late nineteenth century precisely because of their popularity. At this time, the urban realists (also known as the Ashcan School), as well as other emerging art movements, spurned commercial success as an artistic motivation, “pronounced itself masculine, and rejected sentimentality as the condition of its honesty.”¹⁷ Yet within these modern art movements, coterie of artists approached the subjects of childhood and girlhood in different ways.

The American impressionists, for instance, drew inspiration from the works of the French impressionists, who embraced urban settings and sought to capture the autonomous and individualized natures of the children they depicted. Art historian Greg M. Thomas asserts that these scenes function as snapshots of a single moment: unlike earlier genre scenes, these are not intended to offer personal commentary on children’s education or societal values.¹⁸ Pierre-Auguste Renoir’s *Two Sisters (On the Terrace)* (Fig. 9), for example, should be understood as a study of color and light, not a visual treatise on the intersection of girlhood and nature.



Fig. 9. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Two Sisters (On the Terrace)*, 1881. Oil on canvas, 39 1/2 X 31 7/8 in. Art Institute of Chicago; Mr. and Mrs. Lewis Larned Coburn Memorial Collection. 1933.455.

¹⁷ Higonnet, “Pictures We Like,” 39.

¹⁸ Greg M. Thomas, *Impressionist Children: Childhood, Family, and Modern Identity in French Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 31.

Art Historian Bruce Weber proposes that the urban realists further challenged traditional depictions of children by shifting their attention to America's growing immigrant population. By moving away from scenes of upper middle-class white girls frolicking in nature to children from poorer families of various ethnicities in urban environments, these artists tested the notion "of childhood as a period of purity and innocence." As a result, the paintings of the urban realists, such as Robert Henri's *The Fisherman's Son: Thomas Cafferty* (Fig. 10), were "imbued with social consciousness and an absence of sentimentality."¹⁹

Of course, not all modern artists wanted to focus on the realities of lower-class working children or to embrace the new, independent American girl; some refused to abandon the conservative images of their own childhoods, which presented girls as ever-lovely and content. Artists



Fig. 10. Robert Henri, *The Fisherman's Son: Thomas Cafferty*, 1925. Oil on canvas, 24 1/8 X 20 in. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden; Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966. 66. 2429.

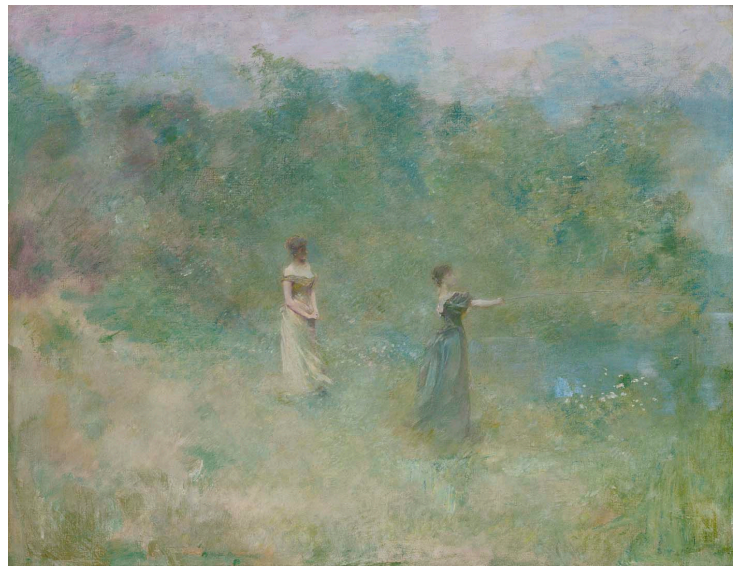


Fig. 11. Thomas Wilmer Dewing, *Summer*, c. 1890. Oil on canvas, 42 1/8 X 54 1/4 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum; Gift of William T. Evans. 1909.7.21.

¹⁹ Bruce Weber, *Ashcan Kids: Children in the Art of Henri, Luks, Glackens, Bellows & Sloan* (New York: Berry-Hill Galleries, Inc., 1998), 9, 25.

associated with the Aesthetic movement and American impressionism, in particular, continued to create old-fashioned compositions that depicted women as beautiful objects. Thomas Wilmer Dewing's (1851-1938) *Summer* (Fig. 11) and Childe Hassam's (1859-1935) *Tanagra (The Builders, New York)* (Fig. 12) are two examples.²⁰

Frank Weston Benson, and the Boston School in general, also tended to paint traditional scenes. While Benson's serene images of his daughters do, in some respects, encapsulate the reality of his family's upper middle-class lifestyle, they also revert to domestic tropes that peaked in popularity during the Civil War. *Elizabeth* (Fig. 13), for example, shows Benson's middle daughter sitting with the family dog, Togo, and *The Sunny Window* (Fig. 14) depicts his eldest daughter, Eleanor, sewing. Both paintings evoke a sense of longing to return to a period when gender roles were concretely defined



Fig. 12. Childe Hassam, *Tanagra (The Builders, New York)*, 1918. Oil on Canvas, 58 ³/₄ X 58 ⁵/₈ in. Smithsonian American Art Museum; Gift of John Gellatly.1926.6.63.



Fig. 13. Frank Weston Benson, *Elizabeth*, c. 1909. Presumed Lost. Official Catalogue of the Department of Fine Arts: Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, Seattle, Washington 1909.

²⁰ Benson, Dewing, and Hassam exhibited together regularly between 1898 and 1918 as members of the primarily impressionist group the Ten American Painters.

and girls were raised to become wives and mothers. Yet Benson's paintings differ from those of Dewing and Hassam in that the young women he portrays appear active within their environments. Benson's daughters were more to him than beautiful objects to be admired: they were young girls to be educated to ensure the Benson family legacy.



Fig. 14. Frank Weston Benson, *The Sunny Window*, 1919. Oil on canvas, 30 X 25 in. Private Collection.

While American painters have varied the compositions and content of their depictions of childhood over the years, one emblematic tradition has prevailed since the eighteenth century: children as symbols of the future, both for their families and the country as a whole. Joseph Blackburn's portrait of *Isaac Winslow and His Family* (Fig. 15) from 1755, for example, shows Winslow's eldest daughter, Lucy, holding several pieces of fruit in her apron. The pears and apples captivate her little sister Hannah's attention and visually link the two girls; in the eighteenth century, fruit, in conjunction with a young girl, symbolized future abundance and fecundity. In this portrait, therefore, Blackburn emphasizes both Lucy and Hannah Winslow's destined roles as wives and mothers, whose progeny would continue their family's legacy. Winslow Homer's *Snap the Whip* (Fig. 16), painted over a century later, in 1872, shows a group of young boys linking hands as they play outside their rural schoolhouse. Although it could not be more different from Blackburn's in formal terms, its reference to the reunification of the nation after the Civil War and Homer's hope for a brighter future for the United States also hints at the future responsibilities of children. For the Winslow girls, the only future that matters is the family's, but the fate of the entire country is in the hands of the boys in *Snap the Whip*.

Children can readily serve as symbols of the future because of the enduring belief that a child's personality and abilities are malleable. Ever since John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was published in 1689, Western middle- and upper-class society has viewed children as possessing limitless potential at birth, even if that potential must be properly harnessed and nurtured. Both Locke and the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau



Fig. 15. Joseph Blackburn, *Isaac Winslow and His Family*, 1755. Oil on Canvas, 54 ½ X 79 ¼ in. Museum of Fine Arts Boston; A. Shuman Collection – Abraham Shuman Fund. 42.684.



Fig. 16. Winslow Homer, *Snap the Whip*, 1872. Oil on canvas, 22 X 36 in. Butler Institute of American Art; Museum Purchase 1918.

maintained that the child's potential is molded and shaped by his or her experiences in childhood and adolescence. Within paintings, this process is literally undertaken by the artist. Every detail, from the clothes worn, to the activities engaged in, to the settings in which the child resides may be understood as subliminally influencing the child's future. In this way, the painter is also an educator who seeks to inspire his or her subject. The artist provides the tools and environment conducive to generating adults who can responsibly assume their proper roles in society.

The outdated tropes of Frank Weston Benson's paintings, therefore, not only suggest the artist's belief that a young woman's education should focus primarily on the domestic arts, but also indicate that Benson took an active role in shaping his daughters' education by posing them with instructional props such as samplers, pets, and books. Furthermore, while it was common for American artists to employ their own children as models, Benson's practice of titling his works after his family members was unusual. As Barbara Dayer Gallati explains in her essay "Family Matters: Artists and Their Model Girls," at the turn of the century it was considered "unrefined to publicize or draw attention to oneself or one's family."²¹ Benson's apparent parental pride implies, then, that he viewed his daughters as role models, and that other families could fashion their own homes after Benson's to create an appropriate educational environment.

The paintings Benson created during his family's summers on the island of North Haven, Maine, provide a view of the environment he constructed for his daughters' education. Many of them, such as *Summer* (Fig. 17), situate Benson's daughters outside, lounging on grassy hillsides in the warm glow of the afternoon sun. These portraits, supported by accounts of the family members spending their days fishing, gardening, berry picking, and domesticating local birds, illustrate Benson's belief in the importance of girls engaging with nature.²² Although the outdoor

²¹ Barbara Dayer Gallati, "Family Matters: Artists and Their Model Girls," in *Angels & Tomboys*, 71.

²² Faith Andrews Bedford, *Impressionist Summers: Frank W. Benson's North Haven* (New York: Skira Rizzoli Publications, 2012), 31-36.

portraits garnered critical acclaim, his lesser-known interior scenes offer a rare glimpse into the family's private life and reconstruct the personalized educational setting in which Benson raised his children. These paintings emphasize Benson's combined roles as artist, father, and educator.



Fig. 17. Frank Weston Benson, *Summer*, 1909. Oil on canvas, 36 1/8 X 44 1/2 in. Rhode Island School of Design Museum; Bequest of Isaac C. Bates. 13.912. In this painting Eleanor (standing) and Elisabeth (far left) are joined by their friends Anna Hathaway (second from left) and Margaret "Gretchen" Strong (far right).

Rainy Day (Fig. 18) is Benson's only known painting to depict the interior of Wooster Farm, his North Haven home. Here, Benson's fourteen-year-old middle daughter, Elisabeth, curls up in a rattan chair. Her comfortable pose indicates not only the informal nature of the scene but also her youthful disregard for manners and appearance. Elisabeth holds an open book in her lap, while a second volume lies open below her feet; these props signify the act of acquiring knowledge. The book on the floor is reflected in the mirror that hangs on the wall above Elisabeth, while her own features are obscured by the mirror's frame, perhaps to stress wisdom over physical beauty. Behind Elisabeth, through the narrow doorway, a wooden desk further implies the importance of learning to write.

While the room is sparsely furnished, a large painting appears through the doorway behind Elisabeth, a blue and white porcelain jar sits on the table to her left, and several small



Fig. 18. Frank Weston Benson, *Rainy Day*, 1906. Oil on canvas, 25 X 30 in. The Art Institute of Chicago; Friends of American Art Collection. 1910.314.

framed paintings decorate the mantelpiece, suggesting that Benson sought to instill in his daughters an appreciation for fine art. A couple of small plants hint at the connection between girls and nature that Benson often stressed in his outdoor scenes. The overall structure of the room is composed of defined horizontal and vertical lines that create a sense of stability and indicate the security of Elisabeth's place within the home, confirmed by her deep stare into the large, rectangular fireplace. Elisabeth's contemplation of the blazing hearth, a traditional symbol of the home, implies her future role as a homemaker.

Overall, in this painting, Benson primarily creates a space for his daughter to develop the literary and nurturing skills she must cultivate in order to fulfill her future roles as wife and mother. There is also the suggestion, however, that within the Benson household Elisabeth has

the opportunity to pursue her interest in the arts. Like the pouring rain outside, society might try to confine Elisabeth to the domestic sphere, but her father gives her the means to become an educated, cultured, and creative young woman.

The Colton Family in Context

While Benson's portraits suggest several of the values and skills the artist hoped his daughters would cultivate, it is unlikely that these paintings played a direct role in their education. As noted in the family's summer diary, the children led active lives, leaving little time to contemplate their father's works. If anything, the act of posing for these portraits stressed the virtue of patience, and sitting for hours with educational props may have helped the girls hone their skills as readers, seamstresses, and dog trainers. Benson needed to find another medium to communicate



Fig. 19. Frank Weston Benson, *Paper Dolls*, 1903-1910. Watercolor on paper, dimensions variable. The High Museum of Art, Atlanta; purchase with funds from Jack and Russell Huber. 2000.198.1-26, 2000.190.1-45, 2000.191.1-57, 2000.192.1-30, 2000.193.1-32, 2000.194.1-7, 2000.195.1-33, 2000.196.1-24, and 2000.197.1-28. The figure in the top right corner is Mary Brown Colton. This is only a subset of her complete wardrobe.

his own educational values while capturing the girls' attention and imagination. To fulfill this need, he took up the popular medium of paper dolls and created the Colton Family (Fig. 19).

The Colton Family Collection dates to between 1903 and 1910, the period in which Benson created the majority of his North Haven portraits. The High Museum acquired the collection in 2000 from Faith Andrews Bedford, Benson's great-granddaughter. In total, the Colton Family Collection includes nine original envelopes containing the figures of five girls, two boys, three women, and one man, along with an extensive wardrobe of clothing and accessories for the entire family. Several of the names and ages of the members of the Colton Family are listed on the envelopes: Francis Colton (age 4), Constance Colton (age 7), Mary Brown Colton (age 9), Morris L. Colton (age 11), Ellie P. Colton (Mother), and Rebecca Colton. Two of the remaining envelopes are labeled "Betty A. Chandler" and "Aunt." Their figures do not appear to be immediate members of the Colton Family, and their contents may have been created on separate occasions. The "Aunt" doll does, however, share the same forward-facing body design, with her right hand pressed to her breast, as the unnamed Colton woman stored in the general "Family Envelope of the Colton Family." This suggests that the two figures could share a wardrobe and indicates that over the years, Benson's daughters probably played with the "Aunt" and "Betty A. Chandler" figures alongside those of the Colton Family.

The paper doll set also contains an extensive collection of clothing – specifically, 113 girls' outfits, 65 women's outfits, 83 female hats, 27 boys' outfits, 5 men's outfits, and 4 male hats – a total of 297 wardrobe pieces.²³ Due to the fragility of the collection, additional items may have been lost over the years. The envelope that contains the outfits of Betty A. Chandler, for example, notes that it contains seven dresses, although it currently contains only six. The

²³ Many of the paper tabs on the wardrobe pieces are folded over or completely missing, indicating that the set was played with by the Benson girls over the years.



Fig. 20. Frank Weston Benson, *Paper Dolls*, 1903-1910. Watercolor on paper, dimensions variable. The High Museum of Art, Atlanta; purchase with funds from Jack and Russell Huber. 2000.198.1-26, 2000.190.1-45, 2000.191.1-57, 2000.192.1-30, 2000.193.1-32, 2000.194.1-7, 2000.195.1-33, 2000.196.1-24, and 2000.197.1-28. These pieces were created by Eleanor Benson for the figure Betty A. Chandler. Three of her seven dresses are not pictured, one of which is presumed lost.

outfits range in size from two to about eight inches tall; the dimensions vary based on the ages of the figures. The smallest items, for example, are dresses for young girls, whereas the tallest outfits belong to the adult figures. The adult male and female figures are all approximately the same size, indicating that the heights of the dolls were based primarily on the age rather than the sex of the figures. The majority of the dolls' outfits either face forward or slightly to one side, but a few of the girls' outfits, including those of Betty A. Chandler, are in profile (Fig. 20).

The fact that there are well over two hundred objects in this collection, all decorated with watercolor, indicates that many hours were devoted to crafting the Coltons. Frank Benson, however, was not the sole creator. According to Faith Andrews Bedford, he worked with his

daughters Eleanor and Sylvia to bring the Colton Family to life, and Betty A. Chandler's envelope (Fig. 20) even notes that its contents were created specifically by Eleanor.²⁴ There is also visual evidence of multiple hands at work, as some of the wardrobe pieces are notably more confidently drawn and are more intricate and precisely detailed than others. Benson's daughters, then, were not only actively engaged in playing with the Colton Family dolls, but also in creating the paper figures and their wardrobes.

The origins of paper dolls date back to ancient China, where, with the invention of paper in the first century AD, figures were crafted for religious purposes. At funerals, family members would often burn a paper figure of the deceased along with representations of various goods to ease the passage into the next world. Another Chinese tradition, still practiced today, involves hanging a paper image of the Kitchen God Zao Jun near one's stove. This figure is believed to watch over the members of the household and annually report on their behavior to the Jade Emperor, one of the most important Taoist gods. In these religious contexts, the fragility of paper figures emphasizes the impermanence of life and calls attention to the need to live by a moral code.²⁵

Japan and other East Asian countries imported Chinese paper figures as early as the ninth century and soon began to create their own forms of paper crafts. Europe, however, began to embrace and produce paper products only in the early twelfth century, and it was not until the creation of the *pantin* in the eighteenth century that paper figures became a popular form of artistic expression. First produced in France, the *pantin*, which translates to "puppet," takes the form of a two-dimensional figure with movable joints. These figures were marketed to adults, as they satirized political figures and the aristocracy. Ironically, the form was so popular that many

²⁴ Faith Andrews Bedford, email message to author, December 31, 2018.

²⁵ Katherine H. Adams and Michael L. Keene, *Paper Dolls: Fragile Figures, Enduring Symbols* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2017), 2, 7, 13.

members of the aristocracy also enjoyed playing with *pantins*. The Duchesse de Chartres and Duchesse d'Orleans even commissioned François Boucher (1703-1770), one of the foremost French rococo artists, to create elaborate *pantins* that were worth 1500 livres, approximately \$10,000 in today's currency. Like early Chinese religious figures, these paper puppets emphasized the moral standards of society and allowed the public to criticize and mock the upper class without fear of retribution.²⁶

It was only when *pantins* came to England, where they were called “jumping jacks,” that paper figures were viewed as children's toys. Their forms also started to evolve, as paper dolls began to be sold with changeable outfits, and they were often associated with either toy theater sets or children's books. When sold with theater sets, paper dolls encouraged children to craft and act out imagined stories of their own design. Dolls that came with books, on the other hand, served as tactile tools that allowed children to actively engage with the stories they read. By changing a character's costume in response to the events of a story, children could more easily visualize the effects of one's choices on one's identity and reputation.²⁷



Fig. 21. Udo J. Keppler, *His First War Hero*, September 11, 1901. Chromolithograph. Library of Congress. Illus. in AP101.P7 1901. This political cartoon shows the German Emperor Wilhelm II controlling a *pantin* of the German field marshal Alfred von Waldersee.

²⁶ Ibid., 10, 14-18.

²⁷ Ibid., 18, 31-32, 54, 57, 76.

In the late nineteenth century, paper dolls began to be sold as independent toys, separate from books or theater kits. At this time, and continuing well into the twentieth century, they were often marketed as family sets that included apparently affluent mothers, children, and babies. Father figures were regularly omitted from these collections, as their absence emphasized their place in the social sphere. Figures of boys were similarly uncommon, and when one did appear in a set, his clothing options often hinted of the time he would spend playing outdoors, beyond the feminine, domestic realm.²⁸ Overall, family collections of paper dolls allowed a girl to momentarily take on the role of a mother and dictate the dress and activities of her charges by imagining stories for her figures to act out. Her play foreshadowed her role as a housekeeper and presented her with an idealized image of an upper middle-class family that she could aspire to recreate in her own home one day.²⁹

While paper dolls educated girls about the ins and outs of family dynamics, the outfits included with these figures taught them how to present themselves in public. In the early twentieth century, upper-class women were expected to own large collections of clothing and to change their attire several times a day. Different outfits and accessories were required for each meal, leisure activity, and evening outing.³⁰ A woman who failed to follow the latest fashions or to present herself properly throughout the day risked damaging her family's social standing. While assembling a proper wardrobe proved a daunting task for most women, this era also saw a major shift in the way Americans acquired clothing. It was still common at the beginning of the century to make clothes at home or consult a personal dressmaker, but mail-order catalogues,

²⁸ While it was rare for paper dolls of boys and men to appear in family sets, there were popular male paper figures of sportsmen and soldiers. In the Phillips Library (Family Photograph Album, Series III, Benson Papers), there is a photograph of a young George Benson playing with a book of paper baseball players and soldiers.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 77-97.

³⁰ Pauline Stevenson, *Edwardian Fashion* (London: Ian Allan LTD, 1980), 9.

fashion magazines, and department stores made it increasingly convenient for families throughout the country to purchase ready-made and affordable fashions.³¹ The ease with which one could purchase new outfits significantly altered the way Americans viewed their clothes: each item was now seen as a temporary acquisition, to be disposed of and replaced by the newest fashion at the start of the next season. Although it became easier to buy ready-made clothes, women were under more pressure than ever to stay apprised of the newest trends, which changed



Fig. 22. Frank Weston Benson, *Lady Trying on a Hat*, 1904. Oil on canvas, 40 1/4 X 32 1/8 in. Rhode Island School of Design Museum; Gift of Walter Callender, Henry D. Sharpe, Howard L. Clark, William Gammell, and Isaac C. Bates. 06.002.

rapidly during this period. Frank Benson's painting *Lady Trying on a Hat* (Fig. 22), for example, shows how a woman's clothes and accessories shaped her identity. Benson's sitter's large black hat obscures her facial features so that she can only be defined by her clothing and the objects in her boudoir. The title also references the new practice of trying on clothes and hats in stores before making purchases, which allowed women to effectively "try on" different characters as they changed their clothes and crafted their self-images.

³¹ Amy T. Peterson et al., *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Clothing Through American History 1900 to the Present: Volume 1:1900-1949*, ed. Amy T. Peterson (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), 15-16, 90-91.

Retailers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries found that paper dolls, along with mail-order catalogues, offered a new mode of advertising. Several of the new department stores such as Macy's, Lord & Taylor, and Gimbels gave patrons complimentary dolls equipped with paper versions of the latest fashions. Women who received these dolls could essentially perform the action of trying on the newest clothing and accessories in the comfort of their own homes. One of the hats contained in the wardrobe of the unidentified Colton woman suggests the act of trying on clothes via a paper doll, as it resembles the large black hat seen in *Lady Trying on a Hat* (Fig. 23). Women who purchased items based on department-store paper figures could continue to use the figures after making purchases to try out different clothing combinations based on items from their own wardrobes. Just like little girls, who could imagine their futures as mothers and wives when playing with paper families, women could image themselves as the belle of the ball dressed in the latest styles when interacting with their department-store figures.³²



Fig. 23. Frank Weston Benson, *Paper Dolls*, 1903-1910. Watercolor on paper, dimensions variable. The High Museum of Art, Atlanta; purchase with funds from Jack and Russell Huber. 2000.198.1-26, 2000.190.1-45, 2000.191.1-57, 2000.192.1-30, 2000.193.1-32, 2000.194.1-7, 2000.195.1-33, 2000.196.1-24, and 2000.197.1-28. A selection of clothes from the unnamed Colton woman's wardrobe.

³² Adams and Keene, *Paper Dolls*, 105, 107.

The Art of Dressing

Like paper dolls showcasing the latest department-store fashions, the Colton Family's wardrobe provides a detailed look at the styles favored by the Benson family. While the lack of colored family photographs and Benson's hazy impressionist technique make it impossible to ascertain whether any of the Coltons' garments are identical to the Bensons', the basic patterns and color palette of the Colton wardrobe resemble several outfits visible in Benson photographs and portraits. For example, out of a total of 178 women's and girls' outfit pieces, 65 dresses, four

blouses, and two short jackets are white, recalling the white, frilly dresses Benson's daughters typically wore when sitting for their portraits. Many of these dresses and blouses are trimmed with colorful sashes and neckerchiefs, resembling the styles apparent in paintings such as *Girl with Pink Bow* (Fig. 24) and *The Hilltop* (1903; Malden Public Library), which shows Eleanor outfitted in a billowing white dress tied at the waist with a blue sash. Other outfits in the Colton Collection differ in color but match dress patterns seen in Benson's paintings. For example, a



Fig. 24. Frank Weston Benson, *Girl with Pink Bow*, 1905. Oil on canvas, 30 1/8 X 25 in. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; Mary Cassatt Fund. 2009.1.

pink-and-white striped dress with a high neckline and large ruffled collar from Constance Colton's envelope (Fig. 25) matches a white dress worn by Sylvia in *Sunlight* (1902; Pfeil Collection). There are also six plaid dresses six sailor dresses, and six coats with fur muffs that

recall outfits in family photographs preserved at the Phillips Library.³³ The similarities between the paper dolls' garments and those worn by the Benson girls in photographs and portraits suggest that Benson and his daughters drew inspiration from their own closets when designing their dolls' wardrobes.



Fig. 25. Frank Weston Benson, *Paper Dolls*, 1903-1910. Watercolor on paper, dimensions variable. The High Museum of Art, Atlanta; purchase with funds from Jack and Russell Huber. 2000.198.1-26, 2000.190.1-45, 2000.191.1-57, 2000.192.1-30, 2000.193.1-32, 2000.194.1-7, 2000.195.1-33, 2000.196.1-24, and 2000.197.1-28. The dress directly under the figure of Constance Colton recalls Sylvia Benson's attire in the portrait *Sunlight*.

Benson not only told his daughters what to wear when posing for his paintings but also selected the clothes they wore in their ordinary lives.³⁴ By the turn of the century, men's and boys' fashions were standardized to the point that all males dressed essentially the same, with

³³ Family Photograph Album, Series III, Benson Papers.

³⁴ Bedford, *Impressionist Summers*, 50.

only minor variations, both within the home and for social events.³⁵ Women's and girls' fashions changed more rapidly during this period due to the industrialization of the fashion industry and the accompanying shift to viewing clothing as seasonal and replaceable. As a result, it was essential for Frank and Ellen Benson to teach their daughters the art of dressing at a young age to ensure that they presented themselves (and by extension, their family) properly in public. The Colton Family served as a carefully controlled medium through which the Benson girls could develop this skill. By providing a large wardrobe that recreated many types of outfits that upper middle-class individuals would wear on various occasions, Benson provided an entertaining way for his daughters to learn how to properly attire every member of their future families. The Colton Collection also allowed Benson to influence his daughters' sense of style by providing a limited number of dress patterns based on the fashions that Benson deemed socially appropriate.

While dressing for different occasions was an important skill in the early twentieth century, the Colton Collection's range of outfits suggests that children generally had fewer types of dress than adults. The Colton girls and boys both appear to have more generalized wardrobes, consisting primarily of outfits that easily transition from everyday wear to formal attire. For the Colton girls, these outfits are primarily dresses decorated with bows and ruffles, while the boys' wardrobes consist of shorts and button-down shirts with ties. The few outfits that do not fall into these categories are either sleepwear – nightgowns for the girls and matching pajama sets and robes for the boys – or coats for cold weather. The wardrobes of the adult Coltons, on the other hand, are more occasion-specific. The majority of the women's outfits are day dresses or casual separates, but among the wardrobes of the three figures are also six coats, one bathing suit, one nightgown, and at least ten evening dresses. The five adult male's outfits are the most event-specific of the collection, consisting of one tuxedo, two three-piece suits, one walking suit, and

³⁵ Estelle Ansley Worrell, *American Costume: 1840-1920* (Harrisburg: Stackpole Books, 1979), 140.

one golfing ensemble (Fig. 26). In general, the outfits seem to indicate the regularity with which each member of the family would enter the social sphere. Children would rarely be invited to formal events, typically spending their time at home. Women were similarly tied to the domestic realm and attended social functions only with a male escort, whether her husband, her suitor, or her father. Men, conversely, regularly and independently engaged in the social sphere and therefore needed a wider range of outfits based on the social, business, and sporting events they attended.



Fig. 26. Frank Weston Benson, *Paper Dolls*, 1903-1910. Watercolor on paper, dimensions variable. The High Museum of Art, Atlanta; purchase with funds from Jack and Russell Huber. 2000.198.1-26, 2000.190.1-45, 2000.191.1-57, 2000.192.1-30, 2000.193.1-32, 2000.194.1-7, 2000.195.1-33, 2000.196.1-24, and 2000.197.1-28.

To modern viewers, Benson's penchant for dressing his daughters and the Colton girls and women in frilly dresses suggests a conservative sense of style, but in fact, Benson's choices reflect the popular fashions of the time. During the first decade of the twentieth century, women's fashion focused on accentuating an hourglass figure and creating an S-bend, or "pouter pigeon" posture, the shape created by garments that appear to push a woman's chest forward,

mimicking the puffed-out chest of a pigeon.³⁶ The garments of all three of the older Colton ladies demonstrate this posture and the desired hourglass shape, and the undergarments painted directly on two of these figures show how corsets were used to obtain this physique (Fig. 27).



Fig. 27. Frank Weston Benson, *Paper Dolls*, 1903-1910. Watercolor on paper, dimensions variable. The High Museum of Art, Atlanta; purchase with funds from Jack and Russell Huber. 2000.198.1-26, 2000.190.1-45, 2000.191.1-57, 2000.192.1-30, 2000.193.1-32, 2000.194.1-7, 2000.195.1-33, 2000.196.1-24, and 2000.197.1-28. The three-quarter view of the outfits for Ellie P. Colton show the slightly puffed chest and hourglass shape that was desired during this period.

Along with the shape of the outfits worn by the Colton women, the styles and details of their clothing are consistent with many of the popular designs of the time. In the early twentieth century, whites and pastels were the preferred colors for women's dresses and were likewise the shades used by Benson's daughters to decorate the Coltons' wardrobe.³⁷ Many of the Coltons' dresses have sashes at the waist, resembling the look of a blouse tucked into a long trumpet skirt, a popular fashion between 1896 and 1906. While the majority of the Colton women's outfits are

³⁶ Jane Farrell-Beck and Jean Parsons, *Twentieth Century Dress in the United States* (New York: Fairchild Publications, Inc., 2007), 13.

³⁷ Worrell, *American Costume*, 146.

dresses, there is one skirt in the collection and four blouses that can be combined to create this separates style.³⁸ Along with sashes, many of the dresses in the collection are decorated with ruffles, bows, and embroidered flowers, and five of the women's coats are trimmed with fur. Many of the outfits have a corresponding hat. Such elaborate details were common during this period as an outward demonstration of a woman's social status as well as her ability to maintain grace and poise under the daunting ornateness of her ensemble.³⁹

The dresses provided for the younger Colton girls similarly correspond to contemporary children's fashions. While less emphasis was placed on accentuating the body shape of young girls, the styles tended to reference the women's fashions. For example, as seen throughout the Colton Collection, it was common for girls' dresses, like women's, to be tied with a sash at the waist.⁴⁰ Their skirts, however, were significantly shorter, typically hitting slightly below the knee to allow the children greater physical freedom. Underneath these short dresses, young girls commonly donned dark stockings, regardless of the color of their outfits, both for warmth and modesty, as can be seen in the dark legs of Betty A. Chandler, Rebecca Colton, and Mary Brown Colton (Fig. 19). Rebecca and Mary, however, each have outfits including tights of different colors, while Constance (Fig. 25) and Francis Colton wear short white bobby socks. Like the women's dresses, the girls' outfits are primarily in pastel colors and decorated with bows and ruffles; several of them also have matching hats. These decorative ensembles prepared the girls for the ornate dresses they would don upon reaching young adulthood at the around the age of seventeen.⁴¹

³⁸ Farrell-Beck and Parsons, *Twentieth Century Dress*, 14.

³⁹ Elizabeth Ewing and Alice Mackrell, *History of Twentieth Century Fashion*, 3rd ed. (Lanham: Barnes & Noble Books, 1992), 6.

⁴⁰ Worrell, *American Costume*, 151.

⁴¹ Farrell-Beck and Parsons, *Twentieth Century Dress*, 18, 19.

Although the Colton Collection includes clothing in styles that were fashionable for women and girls at the beginning of the twentieth century, it notably lacks some fashions – specifically activewear designs – that were popular in the period. This contrasts with the male wardrobes, which include several suitable outfits for exploring the outdoors. The adult male’s closet in particular includes a walking suit equipped with a walking stick and golfing attire complete with a set of clubs. In the early twentieth century, comparable activewear options were designed and marketed for young girls. Aprons, for example, were commonly worn to keep girls’ dresses clean while they played outside or with arts and crafts. Brownie suits, or overalls, were also advertised during this period as sensible play clothes for both boys and girls. Romper play suits were a more feminine alternative to overalls, tailored like girls’ dresses but allowing more



Fig. 28. Frank Weston Benson, *Paper Dolls*, 1903-1910. Watercolor on paper, dimensions variable. The High Museum of Art, Atlanta; purchase with funds from Jack and Russell Huber. 2000.198.1-26, 2000.190.1-45, 2000.191.1-57, 2000.192.1-30, 2000.193.1-32, 2000.194.1-7, 2000.195.1-33, 2000.196.1-24, and 2000.197.1-28. In the second row, the second to last outfit represents a girl’s typical romper play suit.

freedom of movement.⁴² In the Colton Collection, however, there is only one blue romper play suit (Fig. 28) and no aprons or overalls, suggesting that Benson considered them inappropriate for upper middle-class girls such as his daughters. Although he encouraged his daughters to lead active lives, he curtailed the Colton girls' ability to participate in such new sporting pursuits as bicycling, which captured the nation's attention at the turn of the century, by limiting the types of activewear included in the collection. Because Benson and his daughters overlooked most sporting costumes when creating the Colton collection, they must not have considered such pursuits particularly important. The Coltons' frilly dresses, like those worn by Benson's daughters in his portraits, were more appropriate for the familiar domestic realm and the functions of high society than for venturing into the changing world outside their homes.

Similarly, the women in the Colton collection lack the clothes that would have allowed them to actively engage in the outside world. There is one bathing suit for the mother figure, but otherwise the Colton wardrobe contains no modern sportswear. As bicycling became an increasingly popular pastime and mode of transportation, modern women realized that they needed to adapt their clothing for increased mobility. Some chose to wear shorter skirts when riding bikes, while others replaced their skirts with bloomers, or full, knee-length pants.⁴³ Women similarly adapted their dress with divided skirts with chap-like detailing to protect their legs when riding horses.⁴⁴ The women who began to play golf in increasing numbers at the turn of the century found that they needed outfits allowing them to perfect their golf swing and traverse the terrain of the course. Taking up the challenge, the British fashion house Burberry created a new suit that included the "Free-stroke Coat" with its patented "pivot sleeve" that permitted women to easily move their arms in all directions, along with a shorter skirt that would

⁴² Worrell, *American Costume*, 152-153.

⁴³ Farrell-Beck and Parsons, *Twentieth Century Dress*, 16.

⁴⁴ Worrell, *American Costume*, 150.

not drag in the dirt.⁴⁵ The adult Coltons' wardrobes, however, include none of this newly fashioned sportswear.

The Colton women also lack the proper attire for entering the workplace. By 1910, over seven million American women, approximately twenty-four percent, were employed outside the home. Working primarily as secretaries and sales associates, these women desired to dress both fashionably and professionally and generally adopted a new work uniform of matching, tailored jackets and skirts worn with blouses.⁴⁶ These suits were typically black, dark blue, gray, or brown, in stark contrast to the pastel dresses that women wore at home or for social events.⁴⁷ Because such clothing is notably absent from the Colton women's wardrobes, the Benson girls would be less likely to imagine scenes for their dolls that were situated in the workplace. By limiting the scope of their wardrobe, Benson effectively confined the Colton women to the domestic sphere, subtly instilling the idea that women were meant to be mothers and wives, first and foremost.

⁴⁵ Ewing and Mackrell, *Twentieth Century Fashion*, 43,

⁴⁶ Farrell-Beck and Parsons, *Twentieth Century Dress*, 6.

⁴⁷ Worrell, *American Costume*, 147.

Crafting the Idealized Woman

Just as a toy doctor's kit might inspire a child to become a physician or a kitchen set might motivate a child to learn to cook, paper dolls can introduce children to a variety of societal roles implied not only by the wardrobe but also by the social connections among the dolls in a collection. Because Benson's set takes the form of a family, it stresses parental and marital roles, and because it was created for the amusement of Benson's daughters, it especially emphasizes the roles of mother and wife.

More specifically, the Colton Collection appears to reference Benson's own family, and therefore would inspire his daughters to imagine storylines for the Coltons based on their own upper middle-class lifestyle. The similarities between the Benson and Colton families are particularly evident in the two parental figures. The mother figure is named Ellie P. Colton, clearly referencing Benson's wife, Ellen Perry Benson, often called Ellie. Although the adult male figure is not named, his facial features – especially his large, bushy moustache – closely resemble those of the artist himself (Fig. 29 and Fig. 30). Because of the similarities between the paper figures and their parents, the Benson girls may have taken their own parents' personalities and childrearing styles into account when devising stories for their dolls. This process would allow the girls to subliminally model their play after Frank and Ellen Benson's parenting strategies, thereby preparing the Benson girls to eventually raise their own families.

Family collections, typically composed of mothers and children – especially affluent, white families – were prevalent at the turn of the century, but other types of commercial paper-doll sets and characters were also available at the time.⁴⁸ "Fluffy Ruffles," for example, was a popular character created by illustrator Wallace Morgan (1873-1948) and the poet Carolyn Wells

⁴⁸ Adams and Keene, *Paper Dolls*, 97.



Fig. 29. Haeseler, *Frank Weston Benson*, c. 1895. Black and white photographic print, 6 ½ X 4 ¾ in. Archives of American Art.

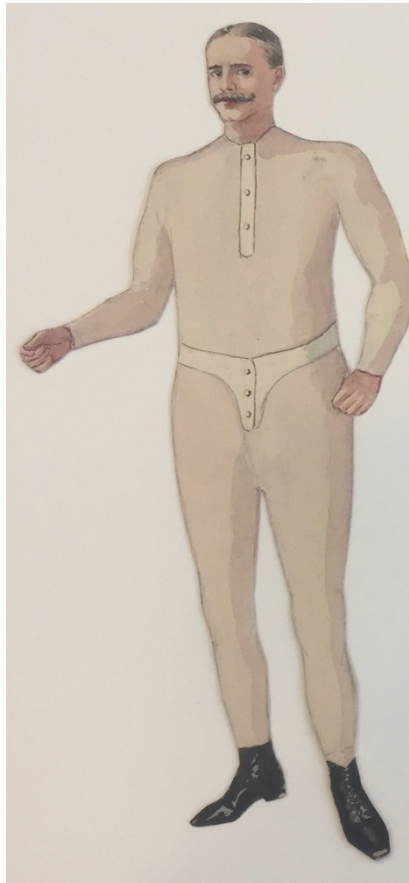


Fig. 30. Frank Weston Benson, *Paper Dolls*, 1903-1910. Watercolor on paper, dimensions variable. The High Museum of Art, Atlanta; purchase with funds from Jack and Russell Huber. 2000.198.1-26, 2000.190.1-45, 2000.191.1-57, 2000.192.1-30, 2000.193.1-32, 2000.194.1-7, 2000.195.1-33, 2000.196.1-24, and 2000.197.1-28.

(1862-1942), whose life as a working woman was serialized in the *New York Herald*. Each Sunday, a full page in the paper was dedicated to Fluffy Ruffles's attempts to find gainful employment. From teaching dance classes to dressing shop windows, Fluffy tried almost every conceivable career available to women at the time. Unfortunately for Fluffy, who needed to work to make up for her lack of inheritance, each week the men at her new workplace would disrupt her productivity by ogling at and flirting with her. The story would inevitably end with either her resignation or dismissal. Fluffy's inability to hold a job did not stop her from becoming a symbol of female independence and dedication in the workforce, however. Her series was a major success, especially among young women. She inspired clothing lines, songs, and even a short-lived Broadway musical that included a speech advocating women's suffrage. Along with the weekly comic strip, the *New York Herald* produced its own popular Fluffy Ruffles paper dolls, equipped with the professional attire needed for her various jobs (Fig. 31).⁴⁹



Fig. 31. The New York Herald, *Fluffy Ruffles*, 1907. Photograph courtesy of Linda Ocasio.

⁴⁹ Linda Ocasio, "Fluffy Ruffles: The 'It' Girl of 1907," *Medium*, June 1, 2015, <https://medium.com/@uflindaocasio/fluffy-ruffles-the-it-girl-of-1907-57ce5c58d924>.

In comparison to such contemporary commercial characters, the Colton Family appears socially conservative. Whereas Fluffy Ruffles was branded as an independent and self-sufficient female who regularly and freely changed professions, the Colton Family figures rely on each other to define their identities within a stable family group. They are first and foremost parents and children, with little freedom within the set to change their social positions. Playing with this set, therefore, consistently exposed the Benson girls to the image of an ideal family to which they could aspire.

Benson's conservative social tendencies are further evidenced by the fact that out of his three daughters, only Eleanor was allowed to attend college. Moreover, because Benson thought that Eleanor had become too liberal during her time at Smith College, he warned his brother against sending his own daughters to college, making Eleanor the first and only college-educated Benson woman of her generation. Benson's son George and his nephews, conversely, all earned college degrees.⁵⁰ Benson's decision to limit his daughters' access to higher education does not appear to stem from the belief that women should not receive educational instruction, however. Instead, he seems to have taken issue with the politically and socially liberal college environment. The Colton Collection itself provides evidence that Benson was willing to contribute to his daughters' education by offering them artistic instruction.

Multiple hands were evidently involved in the creation of the paper dolls. Because the adult male figure and his outfits (Figs. 26 and 30) are more intricately shaded and sharply outlined than most of the others in the collection, Benson himself appears to be the sole creator of those pieces. The male figure's undergarment, in particular, indicates that it was created by Benson, as it is painted in varying shades of white, a technique that requires significant skill. The adult male's outfits also give the illusion of being three-dimensional due to precise detailing that

⁵⁰ Bedford, "Frank W. Benson," 64.

makes the clothing appear naturally creased. An inscription on Betty A. Chandler's envelope, however, notes that its contents were created solely by Eleanor, and other envelopes, notably those of "Aunt" and Mary Brown Colton, contain pieces with jagged edges and hastily scribbled designs (Fig. 32), suggesting that they were created by younger, untrained hands. Two orange dresses owned by Mary Brown Colton, in particular, deviate from the typical dress patterns of the collection and appear far too large for the doll to practically wear. By allowing his daughters to collaborate in the creation of the Colton Collection, Benson taught them to paint with watercolors and to bring their imagined designs to life. The set, therefore, not only allowed Benson's daughters to visualize their futures as mothers and wives, but also introduced the possibility of their becoming artists like their father.



Fig. 32. Frank Weston Benson, *Paper Dolls*, 1903-1910. Watercolor on paper, dimensions variable. The High Museum of Art, Atlanta; purchase with funds from Jack and Russell Huber. 2000.198.1-26, 2000.190.1-45, 2000.191.1-57, 2000.192.1-30, 2000.193.1-32, 2000.194.1-7, 2000.195.1-33, 2000.196.1-24, and 2000.197.1-28.

In the early twentieth century, Boston became a hub for women artists. In style and technique, most aligned themselves with the Boston School; of those artists, many – including

Marion Boyd Allen (1862-1941), Gertrude Fiske (1878-1961), and Marie Danforth Page (1869-1940) – studied under Frank Weston Benson at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, where several women were also employed as teachers and administrators. Like their male counterparts, these artists tended to paint portraits of genteel women in beautiful interiors: two examples are Ellen Day Hale’s (1855-1940) *Morning News* (Fig. 33) and Marie Danforth Page’s *The Book Binder* (Fig. 34).⁵¹

Because Benson taught, mentored, and worked professionally with many women artists, he recognized that women could pursue art not only as a hobby, but as a career. And because women in his artistic circle shared his aesthetic values and embraced similar themes in their works, Benson likely felt that their education as artists did not pose the same threat as Eleanor’s college experience. By working within the conventions of their time, these Boston women managed to become self-sufficient while upholding the status quo, which made them acceptable role models for the Benson girls.



Fig. 33. Ellen Day Hale, *Morning News*, 1905. Oil on canvas, 50 X 36 in. Private collection.



Fig. 34 Marie Page Danforth, *The Book Binder*, 1906. Oil on canvas, 25 X 16 in. Private collection.

⁵¹ Erica E. Hirshler, *A Studio of Her Own: Women Artists in Boston 1870-1940* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2001), 3, 91, 97-100, 173, 179, 187.

Eleanor and Sylvia Benson

The Colton Collection conveys many of the artistic, social, and family values that Frank Weston Benson hoped his daughters Eleanor and Sylvia would absorb as they created and played with the paper-doll set. By examining the later lives of the Benson girls, we can see that many of these values were in fact passed down to his daughters, suggesting that the toys children play with can have a lasting impact on their future outlook and life paths.

Both Benson girls continued to create art throughout their lives. After graduating from Smith College in 1910 at the age of twenty, Eleanor followed in her father's footsteps and pursued a career as a painter of landscapes and portraits. She often turned to her father for guidance, and between 1929 and 1950 kept a notebook where she recorded her father's artistic advice, which focused on improving her technique and encouraged her to continue on her artistic path. For example, on February 3, 1929, he reminded Eleanor that "the only way to paint is to paint, no matter how dissatisfied you are with what you have done. You learn something. No one can tell you things which you must learn from experience."⁵² Eleanor supplemented her practice by taking courses, such as life drawing, at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.⁵³ In February 1932, two of her paintings were shown in Boston at the Smith Exhibition of Arts and Crafts, and in 1935, one of her charcoal portraits was displayed at the Class Headquarters in Seelye Hall at Smith College.⁵⁴ Even though various editions of *The Smith Alumnae Quarterly* note Eleanor's success as a professional painter, none of her works are currently held in public collections. As she was primarily a portraitist, it is likely that the majority of her paintings

⁵² "Advice on Painting from F. W.B.," January 1929 – 1949 or 1950, Series II:B, Benson Papers.

⁵³ "The Alumnae Notes," *The Smith Alumnae Quarterly* (May 1936): 294.

⁵⁴ "Alumnae Notes," *The Smith Alumnae Quarterly* (May 1932): 342; "1910's Twenty-fifth Reunion," *The Smith Alumnae Quarterly* (August 1935): 402. These works were not identified by the *Alumnae Quarterly*, and their current whereabouts are unknown.

remain with the families of her sitters. A few of her works, including a portrait of her mother, Ellen (Fig. 35), are known to survive in the private collections of her descendants.

Eleanor's *Portrait of Ellen Peirson Benson* shows the extent to which her father's works and advice influenced her style. It recalls Frank Benson's 1919 portrait of Eleanor, *The Sunny Window* (Fig. 14): in both paintings, the sitters are placed in front of windows so that they are illuminated by natural light.

Eleanor and Ellen both sit in profile and adopt a slightly hunched posture, tilting their heads toward

their laps. Both women hold white fabric: Eleanor appears to be embroidering her fabric swatch, and although it is difficult to tell whether Ellen is also embroidering or is simply clutching a handkerchief, her downcast, contemplative gaze suggests the latter, especially when compared to Eleanor's focused stare. One of the primary differences between the two portraits is the direction the two sitters face. Eleanor sits facing the right; as paintings are typically read from left to right, mimicking the way one reads a line of text, painters will depict their subject in orientation to suggest the action of advancing toward the future. Ellen, conversely, faces the left in her portrait. Her orientation, coupled with her advanced age and reflective countenance, suggest she may be thinking about her past. She may even be examining a piece of embroidery that she or one of her daughters had made several years earlier. While the themes and moods of the paintings differ, the portraits share compositional similarities that suggest the influence Frank



Fig. 35. Eleanor Benson Lawson, *Portrait of Ellen Peirson*, c. 1943. Private collection. Photograph, collection of Benson scholar Faith Andrews Bedford.

Benson's teaching and advice continued to have on Eleanor's style and choice of subject matter, even thirty years into her career as a painter.

Sylvia Benson also continued to engage in the art world. From her early twenties, she served as her father's secretary, managing his correspondence concerning sales and exhibitions.⁵⁵ She went on to become a costume designer for the Boston Ballet, and the watercolor designs she created recall the fashions she painted as a child.⁵⁶ Just as Sylvia had created wardrobes for the Coltons that suited each doll's personality, with outfits suitable for various activities and events, she created designs as a costumer that conveyed each dancer's character and complemented the storylines and settings of the dances. The stories that Sylvia created and acted out with the Colton dolls in childhood, therefore, prepared her to design costumes for live theater as an adult, carefully costuming the dancers in clothing that reflected their characters while allowing them to move freely. Sylvia (born 1898) is not the only costume designer to have played with paper dolls as a child: both Cecil Beaton (1904-1980) and Bob Mackie (born 1939) put on shows with paper figures long before they became award-winning film and television costume designers.⁵⁷

Sylvia Benson devoted much of her life to looking after her aging parents and did not marry until several years after their deaths.⁵⁸ Consequently, she never embodied the role of the mother figure emphasized in Benson's Colton Collection. Eleanor, on the other hand, married Ralph Lawson on October 18, 1913, at the age of 23, and welcomed her first son just one year later.⁵⁹ Over the next nine years, Eleanor gave birth to a second son and three daughters.⁶⁰ Like her father, she actively participated in her children's lives, serving, for example, as the leader of

⁵⁵ Bedford, "Frank W. Benson," 47.

⁵⁶ Faith Andrews Bedford, email message to author, December 31, 2018.

⁵⁷ Adams and Keene, *Paper Dolls*, 45-46.

⁵⁸ Bedford, "Frank W. Benson," 47.

⁵⁹ Bedford, *American Impressionist*, 147.

⁶⁰ "Notes and Information on Frank Weston Benson from Letters and from his Daughter, Sylvia Benson Lawson," Undated, Series III, Benson Papers.

her daughters' Girl Scout troop.⁶¹ She later became the doting grandmother to sixteen grandchildren. Eleanor, therefore, enthusiastically took on the role of the caring and diligent matriarch, whose responsibilities she had practiced as a child in playing with the Colton Family. Her conception of the ideal woman did differ slightly from her father's, however, as she allowed all her daughters to attend college.⁶²

⁶¹ "Alumnae Notes," *The Smith Alumnae Quarterly* (February 1919): 161.

⁶² "Obituaries," *The Smith Alumnae Quarterly* (Winter 1959): 128.

Conclusion

Paper dolls continued to inspire and amuse children throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Because they are cheap to manufacture and can even be made at home from scraps of paper, the dolls were particularly popular during the Great Depression and World War II, when playing with paper dolls allowed children to imagine lifestyles and futures more colorful and cheerful than the difficult realities they faced in the present.⁶³ Dolls featuring the likenesses of well-known actors sold especially well in the mid-twentieth century, partly because of the increasing popularity of television, which also offered an escape from the drudgeries of everyday life.⁶⁴ After World War II, when the American economy experienced substantial growth, companies began to design and manufacture new and more expensive types of toys, marking the paper doll's decline in the United States. Paper dolls did not vanish completely, however. Even today, books of paper figures can be found at toy stores throughout the country.

Paper dolls directly influenced new types of toys in the late twentieth century and continuing into the twenty-first century. Ruth Handler (1916-2002), the creator of Barbie, for example, was inspired to design her now iconic doll after watching her daughter play with paper figures of adult women in the 1940s.⁶⁵ Like Sylvia and Eleanor Benson, Handler's daughter Barbara was exposed through play to the possibilities of becoming a wife and a mother. Handler was dismayed, however, by the limited futures the paper dolls implied, especially when compared to her son's toys, which encouraged him to imagine himself pursuing numerous careers, such as becoming a doctor or a firefighter. This disparity inspired Handler to create Barbie, who debuted in 1959, essentially a three-dimensional version of a paper doll, defined

⁶³ Juliette Peers, *The Fashion Doll: From Béb  Jumeau to Barbie* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 27.

⁶⁴ Adams and Keene, *Paper Dolls*, 119.

⁶⁵ Peers, *The Fashion Doll*, 199.

primarily by her outfits. Yet Barbie allowed girls to visualize themselves in a range of careers outside the domestic realm, from police officer to president. In 1965, four years before Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, Barbie even became an astronaut.⁶⁶

Over the years, game developers have created computer games in which players – presumably young girls – dress up virtual characters on the Barbie, American Girl, and Disney websites.⁶⁷ These online games often include the option to download and print the virtual figures so they can be played with like standard paper dolls. The prevalence of online dress-up games shows that children continue to have a natural predilection for playing with dolls. These new, online paper-doll games, however, no longer strive to teach girls only how to become mothers who properly dress their families for different events. They also lack the creative, hands-on engagement of homemade paper dolls, as the outfits for the figures are designed by the developer. These games, therefore, introduce girls to the role of a stylist, a relatively new field in the fashion industry, as opposed to the role of a fashion designer or costumer. A few of these online games have a more obvious educational slant: the American Girl’s “Endless Style” game, for example, includes information about fashions worn by girls in the United States from the late 1700s to the 1970s. Most online dress-up games, however, seem to be created primarily to amuse rather than educate children, and rely on popular characters such as Disney princesses to attract their desired audience’s attention. Regardless of their intended use, online dress-up games allow a new generation of girls to engage in a traditional form of play while improving their computer literacy skills.

Dressing up characters is often a major component in other video games marketed to gamers of all ages and genders. In the popular video-game series *The Sims*, for example, players

⁶⁶ “Timeline,” Barbie Media, accessed March 20, 2019, <http://www.barbiemedia.com/timeline.html>.

⁶⁷ <https://play.barbie.com/en-us/games/fashion-and-dress-up-games>;
<http://play.americangirl.com/play/games/?cat=all&popup=EndlessStyle&type=game>;
<https://princess.disney.com/dress-up?group=ariel>

design a household which they then control, much as a child would play with dolls inside a dollhouse.⁶⁸ In creating their households, players design both the physical features of their characters and the outfits they wear. The outfits are specific not only to the ages of the characters but also to different types of events, times of day, and even, in some versions of the game, the weather. The Sims also often change their clothing, depending on their career paths; the specificity of their outfits, therefore, closely corresponds to the way traditional paper-doll sets such as the Colton Collection include extensive wardrobes to ensure that each figure can be properly dressed for a variety of occasions. *The Sims* franchise also welcomes players design and upload their own custom content to the game. This allows players to be independently creative when designing their characters, offering the same artistic freedom that the Benson girls enjoyed in creating the Colton Collection. Now, however, artists must learn not only to draw and paint by hand but also to render their designs as three-dimensional animated objects. The new technology behind the creation of *The Sims* essentially changes the way that gamers of all ages and genders enjoy playing with dolls. The franchise shows that individuals continue to enjoy creating characters – sometimes based on themselves and their friends and family members – as well as testing out different life paths, from becoming an award-winning actress to an infamous criminal.

The paper doll has proved to be extremely adaptable, able to conform not only to new technologies but also to the everchanging beliefs and values of society. While Frank Weston Benson's Colton Collection may seem limited in the range of possibilities it allowed his daughters to imagine, it exemplifies the values of its time. Historically, girls and women have been denied the opportunity to pursue active lives and careers outside the home, and the fashions and family format of Benson's set clearly illustrate this reality. Yet Benson's aim was not to stifle his daughters' imaginations. He hoped to guide his daughters toward a career in the arts,

⁶⁸ <https://www.ea.com/games/the-sims>.

which he believed would maintain the social status quo while allowing them to express their own creativity. As an artist and a teacher and colleague of women artists at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Benson fully understood the freedom, encouragement, and financial success that female artists could find in the Boston arts community. Unlike the other career paths available to women at the time, becoming an artist would not force Benson's daughters to serve only in supporting roles, such as those held by secretaries and shop assistants. Instead, they would be given the opportunity to hone their artistic skills and, in time, to be considered the professional equals of their male counterparts, perhaps even of Frank Benson himself. By letting Sylvia and Eleanor assist in the creation of the Colton Collection, Benson encouraged his daughters to shape and control their own futures.

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