

“Seeing” Nana:

Haunting Portraits and Playful Historical Thinking in the Early Childhood Education Classroom

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Abstract

This article explains how an educator’s haunting experience with the historical portrait, *Sick Girl* (Krogh, 1881), launched an inquiry about the Norwegian artist’s young sister Nana, who died from tuberculosis in 1868 (Hansen, 2014). The hermeneutic experience opened a portal into the past and through interpreting the work of art with preschool children, a picture emerged of childhood in Scandinavia during the 19th century. Derrida’s notion of “hauntology” (1993) and Gadamer’s (2004) ideas about the experience of play in interpreting the work of art, created a framework upon which to build an understanding of Nana’s ghostly visitations and messages. If traces of history can be reconstructed through visual works and artifacts what are the implications for teaching history to young children? The pedagogical strategies used by the educator to uncover the past and enliven teaching and learning point to the relevance of visual literacy and historical portraiture in early childhood education.

Keywords

Hermeneutics, Hauntology, Historical Thinking, Early Childhood Education, Portraiture

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Sick Girl (Krogh, 1881)

“Seeing comes before words...To look is an act of choice” (Berger, 1972, pp. 7,8)

I first saw and was awestruck by the Norwegian artist, Christian Krogh’s painting, *Sick Girl* (1880-81), during the summer of 2006 while visiting the National Gallery in Oslo Norway. The subject, who is said to have been inspired by the artist’s deceased sister, Nana (Wettrell, 2019), peered out from the canvas and her eyes followed me as I walked around the gallery. It appeared like the child herself was sitting in the room, bundled warmly in a white wool blanket, rocking gently and quietly watching me. Her pale skin, piercing dark and sunken eyes, and the single rose with petals falling to the floor are stark reminders of her fragility, decline, and pending death. The girl’s Mona Lisa-like smile is provocative and difficult to describe. Sometimes the corners of her mouth appear to

turn up into a smile, and at other moments her expression is worried and fearful. I could not help but feel sad, empathetic, and frightened by the reality of the child's experience of illness depicted so vividly in oils on canvas. Art historian Jens Thiis poignantly described Krogh's painting:

You encounter this sick child and recognize her as though she were your own, even as there is something in her eyes that recalls a sick animal. Uncomplaining, they hold you captivated, and you give in to a nebulous sense of grief, as you feel the pain of seeing her animal vitality being inexorably consumed by death. (cited in Waallan Hansen, 2014, retrieved from Oslo National Museum <https://www.nasjonalmuseet.no/en/collection/object/NG.M.00805>)

The portrait was the only art piece mounted in a small room in the gallery which made the experience more emotionally triggering and haunting. How could Krogh have painted such a realistic image and created illusions of changing expression and moving eyes? I was fascinated and could not tear myself away from the portrait and wanted to learn more about the remarkable artist.

Krogh had studied law at the University of Oslo (earlier named Kristiania) and art at an art school. After further art studies and training in Germany, Denmark, and Paris, "he became the first professor-director at the Norwegian Academy of Arts in 1909. By focusing on everyday life, he became the local leading person in the transition from romanticism to naturalism" (Wettrell, 2019). Krogh painted a second art piece, *Mother at the Bedside of a Sick Child* (1884), a few years after the *Sick Girl*. I was captured by the latter portrait because of its photographic detail and disturbing depiction of childhood illness in 19th century Norway.

Prior to becoming an educator, I was a curator in a small museum in Toronto, Canada. I was familiar with the practice of artifact and art conservation and spent time working with collections of paintings and portraits in dimly lit art galleries and museum exhibition spaces. However, my experience with Krogh's painting was different and I did not understand why I continued to think about the *Sick Girl*. I had watched films and read books about haunting portraits, art, and time travel and wondered if there was some truth in these stories. Working as a preschool teacher years later, I read the picture book, *Katie Meets the Impressionists* (Mayhew, 2007) to young children. The story describes the experiences of a young girl who visits a museum with her grandmother to see the works of famous impressionist artists. When Katie steps through the picture frames and enters the painted scenes, she meets Renoir, Monet, and Degas, and embarks on adventures with them. The picture book introduced the children to historical artists, their life experiences, art styles and the media that they used. I remember how the story sparked the children's imaginations and dramatic play and the interesting conversations about art and history that followed.

My encounter with the portrait in the Oslo National Gallery years ago was not a film or a storybook but a real and vivid life experience. After I returned to Canada, I was curious about young children's reactions to the portrait, and I placed a photograph of the art piece in the preschool classroom where I was working at that time. I did not purposely draw the children's attention to the image but observed and listened to their responses. Several of the children's parents noticed the photograph and were concerned about exposing young children to images reflecting dark themes of illness and death. They questioned my decision to display the painting. The children, however, were captivated by the image and shared their theories about the *Sick Girl* which are written in a later section of this paper.

Following the mysterious encounter with Nana, I wonder why she continues to address me years later. The portrait created a portal into the past, providing a glimpse of 19th century childhood experiences in Norway and was a bridge to present time as preschool children related their own experiences of illness with the *Sick Girl*. Art critic John Berger (1972) wrote:

Original paintings are silent and still in a sense that information never is... for in the original the silence and stillness permeate the actual material, the paint, in which one follows the traces of the painter's immediate gestures. This has the effect of closing the distance in time between the painting of the picture and one's own act of looking at it. In this special sense all paintings are contemporary. Hence the immediacy of their testimony. Their historical moment is literally there before our eyes. (p. 31)

If traces of history can be reconstructed through visual works, what implications does this have for classroom teaching? Through writing this article and reflecting on the haunting experience I will explore and respond to the following questions: How is historical portraiture relevant to teaching and learning in the early childhood education classroom in the 21st century? How can portraits be used to spark young children's imagination, engage them in discussion and historical thinking? My hope is that this article will provoke critical ideas, questions, and dialogue among educators about pedagogical strategies to uncover the past and enliven teaching and learning through visual literacy and historical portraiture.

The Landscape of Historical Thinking in Early Education: A Scholarly Literature Review

My childhood memories of primary and middle school social study classes include copying lesson notes from the blackboard and memorizing dates, events, and names of historical figures for exams—textbook and curriculum content deemed important in western colonized education contexts and institutions. Pedagogical approaches to history instruction have changed significantly over the past decades in Canadian schools and educators are implementing creative strategies to engage students using educational games, technology (e.g., video games, simulation, Virtual Reality), role playing and reenactments (Compeau 2012; Yoel, 2016). Away from memorization and rote teaching practices, Professor Robert MacDougall noted that “playful historical thinking is a healthy, productive, and even responsible way for citizens of the twenty-first century to relate to the past... It wears its certainties lightly and takes pleasure in the...mystery, and strangeness of the past” (cited in Compeau, 2012, p. 50). In reference to historical thinking, Van Sledgright (2002) noted that students should have opportunities to ask questions, work with several types of evidence and exercise their imagination to understand life in the past (p. 1092). Referring to earlier research studies involving young children, British historian Hilary Cooper (2009) explained that “children aged three to five have some embryonic capacity for historical thinking. They have some awareness of time, can recognize different interpretations of stories, and are capable of deductive reasoning in informal situations” (p. 39).

A review of academic journal articles and texts related to teaching history to children using visual images, was focused on primary school grade levels (McCormick & Hubbard, 2011; Solé, 2019; Turner-Bisset, 2005). Researchers (Barton, 2008; Downey & Levstik, 1991; Wineburg, 1996) have noted that primary children's understanding of chronology and temporality is crucial in their

understanding of history and their development of historical thinking. Glória Solé's (2019) two-year longitudinal study in a primary school in Portugal involved children sequencing historical pictures related to time. Her research findings suggest that children's understanding of chronological time and sequencing events become more sophisticated over time and their use of narrative and visual cues assist them in ordering historical pictures. Recommendations from Solé's research study point to primary grade pedagogical planning that "integrates timelines, pictures, artifacts, storytelling, legends, narratives and genealogies" (p. 167).

Although fewer academic texts and articles about teaching history in preschool settings exist, several countries including Norway emphasize the importance of teaching history to young children and Germany has also set curriculum goals related to history in their early childhood education programming (Skjaeveland, 2017). Professor Yngve Skjaeveland's (2017) interviewed eight early childhood educators about how history was being taught in early childhood education and care centers in Norway and recorded the children's responses and understanding of history and historical time. The results collected after engaging children in history projects showed that:

physical and bodily experiences, along with teachers' storytelling, stimulated the children's interest and understanding of history.... the five- to six-year-olds expressed an emerging historical consciousness. This indicates that although historical understanding in early childhood might be limited, the teaching of history in early childhood education and care can lay the foundation for historical consciousness and its later development at school. (p. 8)

Based on a review of academic literature, preschool, and primary level children gain an understanding of history gradually over time and increase their historical consciousness through playful historical thinking, imagining, and exploring different forms of evidence. Although visual works (e.g., paintings, drawings, and photographs) are considered important artifacts for teaching young children about history in the research literature (Cooper, 2002), few studies and scholarly works have been written specifically about the use of historical portraiture in early learning and childcare programs. Sharing the experiences of the four-year-old children who I worked with as they explored and discussed Krogh's portrait, *The Sick Girl*, might fill a gap in scholarly literature and spark new ideas and questions among educators, scholars, and researchers about ways to teach history and support historical thinking of preschoolers in early childhood education settings.

Hauntings, Play and the Work of Art: Philosophical Underpinnings

Etymologically defined, the term "haunting" (13th century) is "to practice habitually, busy oneself with, take part in," and from Old French *hanter*, "to frequent, visit regularly; have to do with, be familiar with; indulge in, cultivate" (12c). This definition aligns with Philosopher Jacques Derrida's ideas related to the active visitation of ghosts, not in a literal sense, but metaphorically in the context of ethics and our responsibility to the Other. Derrida's invitation of hospitality and receiving the Other—described as someone or something who intrudes in our world and is incomprehensible (Davis, 2005)—is an ethical responsibility (Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 2000). Derrida introduced the term "hauntology" in his text *Spectres de Marx* (1993) and described a ghost as a "deconstructive figure hovering between life and death, presence and absence, and making established certainties vacillate" (Davis, 2005, p. 373). Buse and Scott (1997) have noted that the

metaphor of hauntings and ghosts was also used by theorists and scholars such as Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung (1989) who through their work pointed to what history offers us in contemporary times.

Although Derrida referred to hauntology in the context of deconstruction and literature, perhaps the ideas are applicable to interpreting a work of art. In considering art as a form of visual text, being open to what is interrupting, intruding, and addressing us while viewing the work “may open us up to an essential unknowing which underlies and may determine what we think we know” (Davis, 2005, p. 377). In other words, a haunting experience can potentially reveal something about us, our willingness to put expectations, assumptions, and traditions aside and recognize our state of unknowing about the art and the secrets it holds. “For Derrida...the spectre’s secret is a productive opening of meaning rather than a determinate content to be uncovered” (Davis, 2005, p. 377). Derrida’s notion of “hauntology” relates to the *Sick Girl*’s address, and how exploring and responding to her messages opened a door to the past and sparked historical thinking and increased historical consciousness in the early childhood education classroom (Bjartveit & Panayotidis, 2014; Panayotidis & Bjartveit, 2014). My definition of “historical consciousness” relates to the connection between past and present as explained by historian Peter Seixas (2004),

The area in which collective memory, the writing of history, and other modes of shaping images of the past in the public mind merge.... individual and collective understandings, as well as the relations of historical understanding to those of the present and future. (p. 10)

The *Sick Girl*: A Portal to the Past

Reading Hans-Georg Gadamer’s seminal text, *Truth and Method* (2004), in a Master of Education course at the University of Calgary, helped me to “see” and understand the historical context and relevance of the *Sick Girl* to teaching and learning in early years education settings. Prior to enrolling in the graduate course, I did not understand nor had words to explain the questions that the portrait elicited. Recognizing that hermeneutic experiences can “happen to us over and above our wanting and doing” (Gadamer, 2004, p. xxvi), I was caught up in something that was beyond my comprehension. Gadamer wrote that “the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 103). To understand why the portrait was addressing me required time to talk, read and write about it, to learn about the artist, and view the art through historical, cultural, and philosophical lenses.

Gadamer’s description of play as a “model for art” (p. 105) resonates strongly with me. There was a playful to-and-fro movement between searching for information and studying details of the portrait. I could relate to Gadamer’s explanation of play as having a spirit of its own that fills the player so that the “*primacy of play over the consciousness of the player* is fundamentally acknowledged” (p. 105). I became lost in the “game” of searching for clues that would unlock the *Sick Girl*’s messages. Metaphorically, the portrait sits in a liminal space between past and present time and all the works and life experiences related to the portrait from the period when it was created to present time construct and impact modern-day interpretations of the piece. Referring to the work of art, Gadamer (2004) wrote:

We ask what this identity is that presents itself so differently in the changing course of ages and circumstances. It does not disintegrate into the changing aspects of itself so that it would lose all identity, but it is there in them all. They are all *contemporaneous* (gleichzeitig) with it. Thus, we have the task of interpreting the work of art in terms of time (*Ziet*). (p. 119)

Gadamer (1998, p. 37) described how “art shakes us because we are unprepared and defenseless when exposed to the overpowering impact of a compelling work,” and the play of art “always demands constructive activity” on the part of the player to comprehend its meaning and symbolism. Metaphorically speaking, the portrait is a “palimpsest” (Merriam-Webster online Dictionary) like parchments that the ancient Greeks used and scraped to reuse, adding layers of text and graphics. The meaning of the portrait continues to expand as layers of lived experiences and written and visual works related to the artwork are attached to it. Gadamer (2004) described the connection of past and present as the fusion of horizons of experiences that create a “unified flow of experience” (p. 237) and understanding. The portrait is a portal to the past and a bridge to contemporary times. Conversations about the portrait in the preschool classroom sparked historical thinking and offered opportunities for young children to imagine Nana Krogh’s lived experiences and its relevance to childhood experiences of illness in the 21st century.

Seeing Nana: An Act of Choice

Following my visit to the Oslo National Gallery I placed an image of the *Sick Girl* in the preschool classroom to keep the portrait in sight and continue to think about it. Although some parents thought the portrait was disturbing and emotionally triggering, the children were less concerned and more curious. The to-and-fro motion of play, as Gadamer described, was evident in the children’s conversations and back and forth sharing of ideas as they studied details of the portrait. Referring to cognitive theorist Lev Vygotsky’s (1962) social constructivist theory, Historian Hilary Cooper (2002) explained how children come to understand history through dialogue:

Language is the tool for unlocking the past. Children need to discuss, explain, and justify with each other and with adults the reasons for the chronological sequences they form... to explain and refine the categories they form and the similarities and differences between examples. (p. 17)

The children asked questions about childhood illnesses and shared personal stories about their family experiences with illness and death. A child said that when her grandparent died her family placed a photograph on the mantle above the fireplace in their home so she would always remember what they looked like. Another child explained that she enjoyed being sick because her mother allowed her to stay in bed and eat chicken soup. After staring at the portrait for a long while, a four-year-old girl said: “She [the *Sick Girl*] is looking at us because she wants to see us.” I admired her insightfulness. Nana peered out and addressed this child, as if she were alive within the frame, just as she had called to me in the Oslo National Gallery.

John Berger (1972) noted that “seeing comes before words...To look is an act of choice” (pp. 7,8). Reflecting on the preschool children’s experiences years later, I wonder why they chose to look at the portrait and imagine Nana’s lived experiences. Their interest and curiosity might have been

linked to their young peers who were enrolled in a hospital-run preschool program for children with critical illnesses, located down the hallway in the same building. When the children asked if they could meet their peers and play together, I explained why it was not possible, as children with compromised immune systems must play with sanitized toys within a clean room to avoid the spread of infection.

The children's parents, however, voiced concern about the children exploring themes of illness and death, wanting to shield them from seeing the portrait and protect them from emotional triggers. I do not recall specific reasons why the children's parents wanted to keep them from seeing the portrait. Ryerson (1977) has noted that parents will sometimes avoid and are awkward about talking to their children about death. Cox et al. (2005) have noted that:

Many parents' hesitation to talk to children about death in a straightforward way likely stems from their own fears of death, which may be origins in the way that their own parents spoke to them about it. The implications that this mater-of-fact manner of explaining death is likely to perpetuate a cycle of faulty communication between children and adults about death and grieving. (p. 270)

Recognizing that childhood is a historical and sociocultural construction, the image of the child and how children are viewed and understood has shifted and changed in western historical periods and cultural contexts (Ariés, 1962; Sorin, 2005). During times of high child mortality during the 19th century, illness and death were familiar and a common occurrence within family homes and communities. Children were more protected from witnessing illness and death at the turn of the 19th century when child mortality declined and ill and dying people were placed in hospitals (Schrumpp, 2018, p. 213). In his text about changing attitudes toward death in Western societies throughout history, Historian Phillippe Ariés (1991, pp. 570, 614) wrote that “a heavy silence has fallen over the subject of death.” Wong (2022) explained that the “disappearance” of death might contribute to children's lack of understanding of death and that their beliefs about death might be shaped by “history and tradition found in art and the humanities” (pp. 3-4). Expanding on Wong's ideas, I add that popular culture and media—images that children see in films, on social media and advertising—also construct children's ideas and beliefs about death and dying (Cox et al., 2005; Graham et al., 2018).

Seeing Nana through Historical and Cultural Lenses

Krogh's portrait uncovers traces of truth about the artist's personal experience and the death of his sister and more broadly about childhood in Scandinavia in the later part of the 19th century. Tuberculosis was a dreaded disease from the mid 1800s into the 1900s and many children died during those years. Norwegian artists Hans Heyerdahl (1857-1913), Edvard Munch (1863-1944), and Christian Krogh (1852-1925) drew upon their sisters' dying illnesses and several other Scandinavian artists including Swede Ernst Josephson (1852-1906) and Dane Michael Ancher (1849-1927). In 1930, Edvard Munch wrote the following passage to the director of the Oslo National Gallery: “As for the *Sick Child*, it was the period I think of as the Age of the Pillow. A great many painters did pictures of sick children on their pillows.” The deaths of his mother, father, and sister were vital factors in Munch's personal and artistic development. He expressed that, “without fear and illness, my life would have been a boat without a rudder” (cited in Bischoff, 2000, p. 10).

The familiarity of illness and death was also reflected in family photographs, children's picture books and periodicals in England and Scandinavia during the 19th century. In a children's storybook, *Little Dot* (Walton, 1894), a young girl befriends a gravedigger named Solomon while playing in a cemetery near her home. Curiously watching the old man prepare a grave for a young child who had recently died, Dot questions the gravedigger about the girl's illness and death. Peering into the open grave at the child's coffin, Dot asks:

"Is the little girl inside there?"

"Yes" said Solomon, "she's in there, poor thing; I'll have to fill it up now."

"Isn't it very dark? Said Dot.

"Isn't what dark?"

"In there," said Dot; "isn't it very dark and cold for the poor little girl?"

"Oh, I don't know that" said Solomon. "I don't suppose folks feel cold when they are dead; anyhow we must cover her up warm." (p. 21)

At the end of the story, Dot herself becomes ill and dies and Solomon digs her grave. It is a moving story about friendship and hope despite the reality of illness and death. Handwritten inside the cover of my copy of the book is: "John Whittam. A reward from the Wesleyan Sunday School, Staveley, Jan. 30, 1898 —perhaps an award presented for consistent church attendance or participation in a Sunday School contest or game. Children who read *Little Dot* and other similar texts published at the end of the 19th century were not shielded from the reality of childhood illness and death.



Little Dot and the Gravedigger (Walton, 1894)

In Denmark, the popular newspaper for children, *Avis for Børn*, was published between 1779-1782. With pedagogical goals as a focus, the publication included a lost and found column, humorous stories and “cautionary tales” to teach young readers moral lessons. According to Merethe Roos (2019), the contemporary image of a capable child, reflected in Scandinavian cultural and education discourses, is rooted in 18th and 19th century ideals about children and was reflected in *Avis for Børn*. Stories of children’s illness and deaths were also included in the publication with metaphorical images that align with details in the *Sick Girl* like the fading rose in Nana’s hand. An example of a metaphor from nature describes a young girl, Frederica Levzov, as “a wonderful rose and continues with a description of death as the fading of the flower before it has had a chance to fully bloom” (Roos, 2019, p. 246). In many children’s stories during the 18th and 19th centuries, including *Little Dot* and *Avis for Børn*, the image of a capable child was reflected in how, while lying on their deathbeds, children extended concern and care to their grieving parents and friends, and offered them comfort and assurance in the final hours of their lives.

An image of a capable child is reflected in recent research, conducted by Ragnild Heidi Fauske (2023) from Volda University College in Norway, involving 3–6-year-old children. A walk through a local graveyard and a visit to the grave of one of the child participants, initiated discussion between the children, existential questions about death and dying, and memories from the past—questions echoing those that *Little Dot* asked in the 19th century storybook. The children demonstrated how to respectfully behave by the grave of a sibling and engaged in discussions about death and graveyards. Fauske (2023) emphasized that “death cannot be ignored in education” (p. 157), and preschool teachers can explore existential and philosophical questions together with young children. In reference to multicultural contexts, Bluebond-Langener and Norquest Schwalie (2009, p. 240) stressed that, “death is not a stranger to children. It is a part of their lived experiences, figures into games they play, stories they hear, movies they watch, television programs beamed into their homes” (p. 240).

Haunting the Classroom: Enlivening Teaching and Learning using Historical Portraiture

A place of haunting... “is a place with no phantoms. Ghosts haunt places that exist without them; they return to where they have been excluded.” (Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 2000, pp. 151-152)

Based on my personal observations and experience, teaching and learning history is not prioritized in some post-secondary early childhood education degree programs. When history is not a strong curriculum focus the dark and beautiful historical landscape of childhood is concealed, making it difficult for preservice educators to understand the historical rudiments and construction of contemporary pedagogical theories and practices. If early childhood educators are uninformed, how will they support children’s historical learning, thinking, and imagining? Gadamer emphasized the role of the teacher in creating spaces and experiences that exceed learning and potentially transforms the self of learners: “[F]rom the activity of the teachers grows a new teaching, a living universe, which is certainly more than something known, more than something learnable, but a place where something happens to us” (Gadamer, 1986, p. 59). Teaching that sparks imagination, curiosity and creativity has the potential to change the self of educators and students.

Educator Linda Farr Darling (2008) has described how historical artifacts can be a “hook” to introduce and sustain young children’s interest in historical inquiry. Farr Darling’s teaching strategies to interest and support children’s learning include treasure hunts, inventing stories about artifacts, creating timelines and “then and now” charts (p. 287). Inquiry based learning where children can discuss what they “see,” further provoked by educators’ questions, can keep the cycle of inquiry turning. Thinking *with* questions and the back-and-forth exchange of ideas in the classroom, reflect Gadamer’s description of the oscillating movement of play, and holds potential to spark children’s imagination and historical thinking. Levstik and Barton (1997) have emphasized that “authentic, disciplined inquiry is not easy; teachers must guide and support students at every step of the process—stimulating their interest, helping them develop questions, modeling procedures for collecting information” (p. 77).

When preschool children discussed the *Sick Girl*, they engaged in playful dialogue, and willingly took risks in exploring dark topics and asking questions related to illness and death—themes that some children had been shielded from and wished to investigate (Bjartveit & Panayotidis, 2017). The children related details in the historical portrait to contemporary and personal life experiences which points to the relevance and importance of including historical portraiture in early childhood education curricula and classrooms.

Although our experiences were different and the children were not impacted by the portrait in the same way as me, the *Sick Girl*’s incessant calls fueled my curiosity and launched an inquiry with the children about the portrait. My haunting experience initiated a playful exchange of ideas that moved us back and forth between the past and present, life and death, presence and absence, real and imaginary worlds. A strong connection between Derrida’s (1993) “hauntology” and Gadamer’s (2004) concept of “play” is reflected in how the haunting itself and our responses (both mine and the children’s), to the *Sick Girl*’s call initiated and sustained the playful and oscillating movement of dialogue.

Linking “hauntology” and ghostly encounters to the deconstruction of texts and processes of literature, Derrida encouraged conversing with ghosts to “open us up to the experience of secrecy ... an essential unknowing which underlies and may undermine what we think we know. (Davis, 2005, p. 377). If uncovering textual secrets can be revealed through “close reading and daring speculation” (Davis, 2005, p. 377), the work of art, viewed as *visual text*, might be read similarly. Close observation, choosing to see the *Sick Girl* with speculation, and being open to what addressed us uncovered secrets about the work of art. It was through dialogue and language that the children and I discovered some truth about the portrait in relation to history, culture, and lived experiences (illness & death) in past and contemporary periods. By exercising imagination and historical thinking, the children moved effortlessly between the past and present as if they themselves were ghosts floating through portals of time.

Revisiting Nana

To talk about an image is not to decode it, and having once broken its code, to have done with it, the final meaning having been established and reduced to words.... The image is a place to see what we can see, a site of exploration, a place to travel, and like all sites worthy of a visit, worth returning to because there is always more to see. (Leppert, 1996, pp 7-8)

In July 2023, I returned to Norway and visited the new Oslo National Museum, where the *Sick Girl* is exhibited. I was struck by the number of young families and children in the gallery spaces and the museum's focus on engaging young children through the art activities in each room. Children are invited to match visual images on cards with the portraits and landscapes hanging on the walls. In drawing rooms, equipped with art supplies, children and adults were creating art together and displaying their work, leaving traces of themselves in the space. Remembering the importance of questions and dialogue about the *Sick Girl* in the preschool classroom, it was impressive to read question cards in each room, meant to spark conversations with children about the art works.

Prior to my visit I wondered what emotions I would feel and what I might “see” and understand differently about the *Sick Girl* compared to past experiences. Museum visits in the past had triggered deep emotions in me—what Huzinga referred to as “historical sensation” which can happen “by reading a document chronicle, hearing a song, examining a print, looking at an old land- or cityscape” (cited in Van der Lem, 2010, para. 4). The painting was mounted in a large room with a collection of Norwegian works, by artists Krogh and Munch, related to the theme, *Justice*. Many of the paintings depicted women's lives in 19th century Norway and included child mortality and mothers' experiences of grief and loss. Other paintings reflected the treatment of prostitutes, women's heavy workloads and poverty.

Seeing Nana again was like greeting an old friend. The portrait seemed much smaller than I had remembered it, which points to how perceptions change based on space and how works of art are displayed. I noted for the first time that the girl's hands, painted in hues of blue, had a corpse-like appearance. The artist's ominous symbol of impending doom was masterfully represented by the movement of death, creeping from the fading flower toward her hands and upward. This was a striking observation—why hadn't I noticed it before? Sitting for hours in the gallery space, I curiously observed museum visitors' reactions to the portrait. Tour groups with interpreters stood only for a few moments to view the *Sick Girl* before moving on to the larger art pieces that drew their attention away and dominated the space. Few people took time to look closely and discuss the portrait. I continue to question why the experience of seeing the *Sick Girl* became a powerful force that has haunted me for years.



Sick Girl's hands (Krogh, 1881)

Norwegian Artist Lars Kristian Gulbrandsen (1931-2005) said that “to see means to be able to see that something is not what you expect it to be. If you can see beyond the expected, you can see new things you’ve never seen before” (Stranberg, 2003, film: 31:59). I see Nana in my thoughts, dreams and in the world. The interpretation of Krogh’s portrait is unraveling like a long thread as I continue to ask different questions and attempt to reflect on and understand the painting. Gadamer (2004) described the oscillating movement of questioning and dialogue to uncover truth as “play” or “spiel.” Over the years, the questions, the spiel and experience with the portrait have increased my understanding of the art piece in the context of history, culture, and pedagogical practice. Seeing Nana and responding to her call expanded the horizon of teaching and learning and motivated preschool children to uncover the past and discover traces of truth about children and childhood in Norway during the late 19th century. The relevance and importance of using historical portraiture in the early childhood classroom has uncovered new pedagogical practices. The *Sick Girl* continues to exercise the imagination and increase historical thinking and imagination more than a century after it was painted. Nana is immortal and her messages rupture both time and place. I believe my continuing search for the truth about the *Sick Girl* will be revealed if, as Berger (1972) explained, I choose to see it.

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