



The White Doll

John Hassall

Not on display

Title/Description: The White Doll

Artist/Maker: John Hassall (Artist)

Born: 1900 c.

Object Type: Watercolour

Materials: Ink, Paper, Watercolour

Technique: Drawing, Painting

Measurements: Unframed: (h. 254 x w. 254 mm) Framed: (h. 445 x w. 432 x d. 15 mm)

Inscription: Signed in ink, 'John Hassall'

Accession Number: 21014

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Britain, England

School/Style: Art Nouveau

This watercolour painting, titled *The White Doll*, was painted around 1900 by the illustrator and graphic artist, John Hassall (1868-1948). Born in Kent, England, Hassall left the UK to study art in Antwerp and Paris, where he discovered the Art Nouveau poster designs of Alphonse Mucha (see objects 21012a, 21012b, and 21013). From 1895, Hassall received graphic-design commissions from David Allen & Sons, for whom he produced a variety of advertisements. [1]

The artist has depicted a young girl, dressed in a white, wearing a wide-brimmed bonnet that fastens with a large bow beneath her chin. The child's small face peers out from beneath the layers of gathered fabric giving her a doll-like appearance. This impression is underlined by the added detail of a toy doll, also dressed in white, which the child is shown to be clutching with both hands. Hassall captures a subtle tension in the girl's serious expression that could be interpreted as obstinacy or wilfulness.

In the background of *The White Doll*, Hassall creates the impression of a disordered nursery. Floral patterned cushions and textiles are strewn across the floor and the walls are crowded with masks, musical instruments and ornaments. The application of blocks of flat colour is characteristic of Hassall's graphic style.

In the late 1890s, Hassall received commissions to produce illustrations for nursery rhymes and fairy stories. The naïve subject matter of *The White Doll* was possibly influenced by Hassall's work for children's books and the nursery friezes he designed for Liberty & Co, in collaboration with Cecil Aldin. [2] The young girl bears a resemblance to the children pictured in his nursery chromolithographs from the same period. [3] These images were produced for the child's amusement and served the didactic function of training them 'to discriminate and enjoy artistic work' from a young age. [4] These images also provide a commentary on societal attitudes towards

childhood innocence and obedience at the turn of the twentieth century.

In 1906, Hassall's *The White Doll* was reproduced in 'The Poster Paintings and Illustrations of John Hassall R.I' in *The Studio: An Illustrated Magazine of Fine and Applied Art* in 1906 [5]. *The Studio* was a London-based journal that promoted artists working in the Art Nouveau style.

Vanessa Tothill, March 2021

[1] <http://visualarts.britishcouncil.org/collection/artists/hassall-john-1868> [accessed 18 March 2021]

[2] https://www.lissllewellyn.com/show-5701-w_Artist-John-Hassall_A_27_r.htm [accessed 18 March 2021]; Amanda Geitner and Emma Hazell (editors), *The Anderson Collection of Art Nouveau* (Norwich: Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, University of East Anglia, 2003), p. 133.

[3] A set of three nursery lithographs is titled *Playtime, Lesson Time* and *Bed Time*, around 1900.

[4] *The Liberty Bazaar*, 1898 quoted in Geitner, p. 133.

[5] Geitner, p. 133.

Further Reading

Geitner, Amanda and Emma Hazell (editors), *The Anderson Collection of Art Nouveau* (Norwich: Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, University of East Anglia, 2003)

Greenhalgh, Paul (editor), *Art Nouveau 1890-1914* (London: V&A Publications, 2000)
