

Exhibition at the Lentos: Can girls really be anything?

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The comprehensive thematic exhibition "Being a Girl*!?" explores images and roles of girls. A timely exhibition, even if it doesn't quite capture the present.



The Viennese photographer Anna Breit portrays teenagers in their children's rooms, including "Emma and Debra".

Girls can be anything! Loud, wild, angry. Well-behaved, embarrassing, smart, messy. They can wear blue. Pink dresses. Sweatpants. Stand up for themselves. Want to be an astronaut or a firefighter. But is it really that simple? After all, we live in a world where girls and young women have never had so many opportunities and are simultaneously confronted with such a mass of clichés, comments, and ideals. On social media, they're almost impossible to avoid: Brat Girl, Clean Girl, Vanilla Girl, Girl Boss, Soft Girl. What else is there?

Therefore, the new exhibition "Being a Girl*!?: From Panel Painting to Social Media" at the Lentos Art Museum in Linz comes at just the right time. It's a time when gender and roles are being hotly debated. However, the extensive exhibition doesn't necessarily reach quite that far into the present. Rather, it explores the multifaceted nature of what being a girl can mean, how girls have been depicted as figures in art, and how this image has changed. The exhibition doesn't take a hard line; instead, it calmly examines this complex situation. No easy feat with such a vast topic.



Well-behaved and dressed up: The painting "Children's Dance" by Eugenie Breithut-Munk, created around 1905. (Belvedere Vienna)

The word "Mädchen" (girl) comes from "Mägdchen" (maiden).

The exhibition ranges—just as one might imagine—from (courtly) portraits of little girls in elaborately decorated gowns to photographs of teenage girls with dyed hair and serious expressions in their bedrooms. Fortunately, the show, with its 160 artworks, by no means imposes a chronological approach on the viewer.

Contemporary works are naturally combined with historical paintings or objects and thus thematically categorized.



A fairytale girl: Artist Dwora Fried locks Little Red Riding Hood in a box as a naked, bound doll. (Joshua White Photography)

When the topic is girls as a workforce, one sees depictions of child maids (we learn that the word "girl" comes from "Mägdchen," meaning little maid), a documentary photo series from the 1990s of children forced to collect garbage, or a staged, exaggerated video work in which a girl has to endlessly wind wool into a ball. This role of the innocent and helpless creature is also found in classic fairy tales, where

girls usually have had to be rescued (by male characters). The artist Dwora Fried, for example, locks Little Red Riding Hood, as a naked, bound doll, in a small display case.

No Helnweins

The exhibition counters the male gaze in art—the way artists view women—with a preponderance of female artists. Contemporary names, especially Theresa Präauer, Dorothee Golz, Sophia Süßmilch, and Anna Breit, are juxtaposed with historical paintings by Jakob Seisenegger, Egon Schiele, and Kremser Schmidt. Curator Brigitte Reutner-Doneus emphasizes that she wanted to include many different perspectives in the show to present as diverse a range of images of girls as possible.

Clearly, she could have presented chapters like "Sad Girls: When Girls Are Not Doing Well" in a more graphic way and exhibited paintings by Gottfried Helnwein, explains Reutner-Doneus. But that's precisely what she didn't want. "You don't have to show naked, abused bodies to address this aspect," the curator says. Rather, it's about subtle hints, as in a work from 1550 in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, where it's not entirely clear whether the figures depicted are a father and daughter or an older husband and a child bride.



Focus on Hair: In the chapter on puberty, a 15th-century sculpture of Saint Mary Magdalene (on the right wall) is combined with a witty photographic work by performance artist Marlen Haring. (Violetta Walkolbinger)

The exhibition effectively illustrates the transition from girlhood to young womanhood with a compelling focus: one aspect that is particularly important to many adolescent girls, as Reutner-Doneus learned in her research, is hair. The combination of a 15th-century sculpture of Saint Mary Magdalene – who, according to legend, was covered only by her long hair – and a witty photographic work by performance artist Marlen Haring – in which she portrays herself like a genuine Wookiee – perfectly captures this predilection.

Where are the makeup tutorials?

But at least, after this treatment of puberty, the exhibition should have included insights into current developments on social media. Where are the makeup tutorials? Where are the annoying youth trends? Because even though the exhibition addresses topics like gender roles and hate speech with video works and offers a whole range of workshops, it doesn't quite capture the zeitgeist. Perhaps that's simply impossible in such a rapidly changing world?



Two short films by Vienna-based artist and filmmaker Isa Schieche stand out here. In **The Robbers**, which also features actress Thea Ehre, three trans women train for a robbery they plan to carry out disguised as masked men. The film also addresses gender stereotypes and traits that women and girls face. Incidentally, the exhibition title, which includes a gender asterisk, reflects this very contemporary interpretation of the concept of "girl." Girls are diverse, too. (Katharina Rustler, November 9, 2025)

