

Family

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GERTRUDE KÄSEBIER



I Attributed to Hermine Käsebier Turner *Gertrude Käsebier and her Grandson Charles*. Platinum print, ca. 1903.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to thank Barbara L. Michaels, Ph. D., for her insightful catalogue essay, and her recent research on the photographer. The capable assistance of Michael Lee, Erica Lee and Erin McGrath and the useful information provided by Verna Curtis and William Homer are also appreciated.

CONDITIONS OF SALE

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Post Office Box 40447 San Francisco, California 94140 Tel. 415 626-2677 Fax 415 552-4160 Email pmhi@hertzmann.net HEN Gertrude Käsebier began her photography career in the 1890s, the western world had been fighting through the great upheaval of the industrial revolution for nearly a century. Forced from their farms and small towns to find work in the growing mines, mills, and factories, millions of people landed in polluted, disease-ridden, over-crowded cities. Widespread political corruption, gaping disparities of wealth and power, along with social, moral and religious turmoil, characterized the epoch.

In reaction to this radical disruption of society, many social and artistic movements in Europe and the United States sought to recapture the values of the pre-industrial era, before unspoiled nature, rural life, independence, handcrafts, community, and spirituality were lost to industrialization. The Barbizon painters of France replaced religious themes, allegory and monumental landscape with a more personal and intimate view of nature. John Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites of England served their religious faith and "truth to nature" by painting natural scenes in luxuriant detail. In the United States the Hudson River school artists and the Luminists painted landscapes as symbols of the transcendental spirituality of nature. In an effort to restore dignity to labor, the Arts and Crafts movement created furniture, ceramics, and other beautiful hand-made objects for daily use. Frederick Law Olmstead and the public parks movement, the Audubon Society, John Muir and the Sierra Club, along with Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and many others, sought a spiritual and moral renewal through the preservation of nature and craftsmanship.

Firmly devoted to these artistic ideals, Gertrude Käsebier celebrated motherhood and traditional family life, important symbols of pre-industrial values. She photographed contented mothers and happy, active children enjoying each other's companionship, often in a bucolic outdoor setting. Much like the members of the arts and crafts movement, Gertrude Käsebier and other eminent photographers in the late nineteenth century embraced a handcrafted approach to the medium. Naturalism in photography, with its strict dogma of sharp focus gave way to pictorialism. Painterly, softly focused effects and modern design replaced "truth to nature." A founding member of Alfred Stieglitz's Photo-Secession, Käsebier played a critical role in the evolution of artistic photography as a medium of personal expression and the wider acceptance of photography as an art form.



2 The Road to Rome. Gum bichromate print, ca. 1903.

GERTRUDE KÄSEBIER'S VISIONS OF CHILDHOOD AND MOTHERHOOD

by Barbara Michaels

ERTRUDE Käsebier regretted not being a skilled photographer when her children were young, but she made up for lost time when her first grandchild, Charles O'Malley, was born in 1901. By then, Käsebier was at the peak of her career as a professional portraitist and pictorial photographer. In her New York studio, she photographed eminent men and women. Her photographs had been reproduced in Alfred Stieglitz's *Camera Notes* and were about to be featured in the first issue of *Camera Work*.

Charles's birth set her on a new path. Working during leisure hours away from her studio, Käsebier created some of her most famous images, as well as sensitive, less-known photographs, like *Bath Time* (Pl. 13), the silhouetted scene of baby Charles surrounded by his parents and aunt. Käsebier used photography as a medium of self-expression to convey her feelings about childhood and what she called "the tremendous import of motherhood." Reflecting on posing her daughter and infant grandson in a session that included *Gertrude O'Malley and her Son Charles on the Porch* (Pl. 4) and *Gertrude O'Malley Holding her Son Charles* (Pl. 9), she said:

"there suddenly seemed to develop between us a greater intimacy than I had ever known before. Every barrier was down. We were not two women, mother and daughter, old and young, but two mothers with one feeling: all I had experienced in life that had opened my eyes and brought me in close touch with humanity seemed to well up and meet an instant response in her..."

The photographs in this catalogue were originally made for Käsebier's daughter, Gertrude O'Malley, and the O'Malley family, yet the public saw many of the same images in exhibitions and reproductions. Both of the mother and child pictures mentioned above became illustrations to a serialized novel, *The Making of a Country Home*, in the popular, mass circulation magazine, *World's Work*.² The Picture Book (Pl. 8) and Happy Days (Pl. 3) appeared in *Camera Work* Number Ten (April 1905); they, along with The Still Water, The Golden Age, and The Road to Rome were shown at Stieglitz's Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession ("291"), and elsewhere.

While studying portrait painting at Pratt Institute during the 1890s, Käsebier absorbed contemporary theories of artistic design and of child rearing. These ideas inform her photographs and enhance their visual and emotional appeal. The artist, Arthur Wesley Dow, who taught at Pratt, extolled her camera work. In 1899 he declared: "Mrs. Käsebier is answering the question whether the camera can be substituted for the palette....Rejecting conventionalities and traditional notions, she makes her photographs works of fine art." Dow praised the plain backgrounds and natural poses that differentiated her portrait style from the stilted poses and elaborate backdrops typical of 1890s commercial portraits. The velvety platinum print, Charles F. O'Malley, (Pl. 7) is comparable to photographs whose subtle tonalities Dow praised. Yet it goes beyond Käsebier's earlier studio portraits: in capturing the intense gaze of the grandson she knew so well, Käsebier created a close-up of unusual intimacy.

After 1900, Käsebier adroitly applied Dow's artistic precepts to her camera work. Although photography was not taught at Pratt, Dow's lessons suited it. He required students to begin a composition with the same basic choice that photographers must make: where to put a picture's edges. He advocated asymmetrical compositions with high horizon lines and flattened, patterned design. His creative principles underlie Käsebier's inclusion of the distant, curving shoreline in The Still Water (Pl. 15) and her arrangement of dock, trees and reflections in *Grandfather Eduard Käsebier, Hermine and Charles* (Pl. 12).

In a masterful example of Dow-inspired asymmetrical composition, The Picture Book (Pl. 8) shows Käsebier's friend, the illustrator Beatrice Baxter (Ruyl), helping Charles to draw in her sketchbook. Like the image Gertrude O'Malley and Charles O'Malley, Newport, R.I. (Pl. 6), it is one of many Käsebier photographs that reflect the educational theories of Friedrich Froebel, the German founder of the kindergarten movement. Froebel, whose theories were taught at Pratt, urged mothers, as well as teachers, to foster children's intellectual growth and independence, beginning at infancy.⁴

Käsebier's photographs, in keeping with Froebel's ideas, often depict children seeking independence, reaching away from adults. In *Hermine Käsebier Turner and her Nephew Charles* (Pl. 5) Charles talks to his Aunt Hermine, but also points away from her, towards a long country road. In one of Käsebier's own favorite images (Pl. 2), Charles ventures out alone on that curving road. Käsebier titled the picture The Road to Rome, alluding to a contemporary story by Kenneth Grahame (author of *The Wind in the Willows*). She claimed that in the picture her grandson sees "a wild rose... a lamb tethered to a bush," and a duck idly floating on the water. Yet no rose, duck or lamb is visible. Like Grahame's story, Käsebier's picture takes a boy's vivid imagination as its theme.

The Golden Age (Pl. II), by which Grahame and the photographer meant childhood, is a companion to The Road to Rome, stylistically and psychologically. Its title comes from Grahame's book, *The Golden Age*, which contained the story, "The Road to Rome." Both photographs are as much about an artist's freedom and imagination as about a child's. In both, by picturing a small child in an unpopulated landscape, Käsebier may have been evoking her own unfettered childhood. She recalled playing "alone among the rocks of Colorado" where "the vast altitudes and spaces appealed to me in an unforgettable way."

As if to counter the received idea that "a photograph cannot lie," as well as to assert her own creativity and versatility, Käsebier used handwork to make these unreal, dreamlike images. To create the final image of The Road to Rome, Käsebier painted on a glossy work print (Princeton University Museum) which she then rephotographed. The new negative was printed in malleable gum bichromate emulsion, which she manipulated by hand, making a mysterious, magical landscape. The Golden Age also involved creative alterations. She first made a gum print from her rectangular glass plate negative of the image, darkening the sky and foreground. Next she took the unusual step of cutting the print apart and removing a dull central strip of sky and path. Finally, she glued the two sides together. By bringing the background trees closer to each other and shortening the handle on Charles's wagon she created a compact, dramatic image in which the half-length figure of Charles gained greater prominence.⁷

For studio portraits, Käsebier usually posed children holding a toy. Her pictures of Charles expand that practice by showing him actively at play. In *Charles in White Cap* (Pl. 14) he pulls a wagon, the wagon serving both as a plaything and as an abstract design of circles and lines. Imaginatively he mimics adult activities in: *Raking the Garden* (Pl. 10), *The Baseball Player* (Pl. 18), and *The Fireman* (Pl. 19). Indoors, *Charles Explores a Cabinet* (Pl. 20) and plays *Head Waiter* (Pl. 21) with a bottle of wine.

Happy Days, (Pl. 3) is the tour de force of Käsebier's creative spurt during her 1903 working vacation in Newport, Rhode Island. That summer, in The Road to Rome, she projected herself into her grandson's thoughts. For Happy Days she physically entered the world of children at play by bringing her camera down to their level. She composed this picture in the ground glass of her viewfinder. With her vision doubtless primed by cut-offs in Degas, Whistler, and Japanese prints, Käsebier eliminated parts of each figure on all four edges. The "decapitation" of the central figure was mocked in France, where a conservative critic quipped that "she amuses herself by systematically chopping people off." More perceptive viewers see Happy Days as a prime example of Käsebier's innovative artistic vision, her ability to adapt modern compositional devices, like cropping and shallow space, to photography. Its radical composition is unique among her photographs.

More than a hundred years after they were made, Käsebier's family photographs retain their aesthetic and psychological power. Her acute sense of design and photographic craftsmanship are at the heart of their aesthetic impact. Their psychological effect is more subtle. It springs from Käsebier's uncanny ability to transform her love for her grandson and family into pictures that remain universal images of childhood and nurturing.

NOTES

- I. Mary Fanton Roberts [Giles Edgerton], "Photography as an Emotional Art: A Study of the Work of Gertrude Käsebier," *Craftsman 12* (April 1907), pp.91–92.
- 2. Illustrations to J. P. Mowbray, "The Making of a Country Home," *Everybody's Magazine*, Vol. IV, No. 1, February 1901, pp. 101, 104.
- 3. Arthur W. Dow, "Mrs. Gertrude Käsebier's Portrait Photographs from a Painter's Point of View," *Camera Notes* 3 (July 1899), pp. 22-23. See also Barbara L. Michaels, "Arthur Wesley Dow and Photography," in *Arthur Wesley Dow: His Art and His Influence*, New York: Spanierman Gallery, 1999, pp. 85-91.
- 4. On Froebel's influence, see Michaels, *Gertrude Käsebier: The Photographer and Her Photographs*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992, pp. 17-18, 82, and 149.
- 5. Walter Chambers, "Called Greatest Woman Photographer, Gertrude Käsebier is Now a Cripple," *New York Telegram*, Jan. 25, 1930, p. 2.
- 6. Käsebier to Laura Gilpin, Sept. 1, 1923, Amon Carter Museum.
- 7. Her changes can be understood by comparing the square gum print illustrated here with a modern work print made from the original rectangular negative of *The Golden Age* (both negative and modern print are in the International Museum of Photography in Rochester).
- 8. Käsebier vignetted this print to make the picture more artistic and to concentrate the viewer's attention on Charles. The original negative at George Eastman House shows the distracting background that she eliminated.
- 9. E. Wallon, "Le Salon," *Photo-Gazette*, May 25, 1904, pp. 132-33.



3 HAPPY DAYS Platinum print, 1903



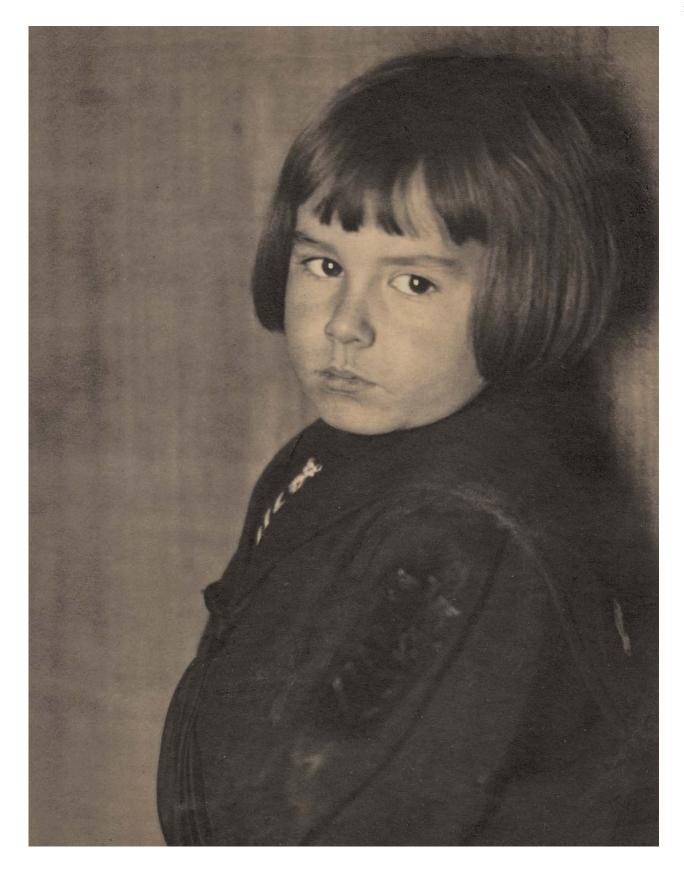
4
Gertrude O'Malley and
her Son Charles on the Porch.
Platinum print, 1900.



5 Hermine Käsebier Turner and her Nephew Charles. Platinum print, ca. 1903.



GERTRUDE O'MALLEY AND CHARLES O'MALLEY, NEWPORT, R.I. Platinum print, 1903.



7 Charles F. O'Malley. Platinum print, ca. 1905.



8 The Picture Book. Platinum print, 1903.



9 Gertrude O'Malley Holding her Son Charles. Glycerin platinum print, 1900.



Raking the Garden.
Platinum print, ca. 1904.



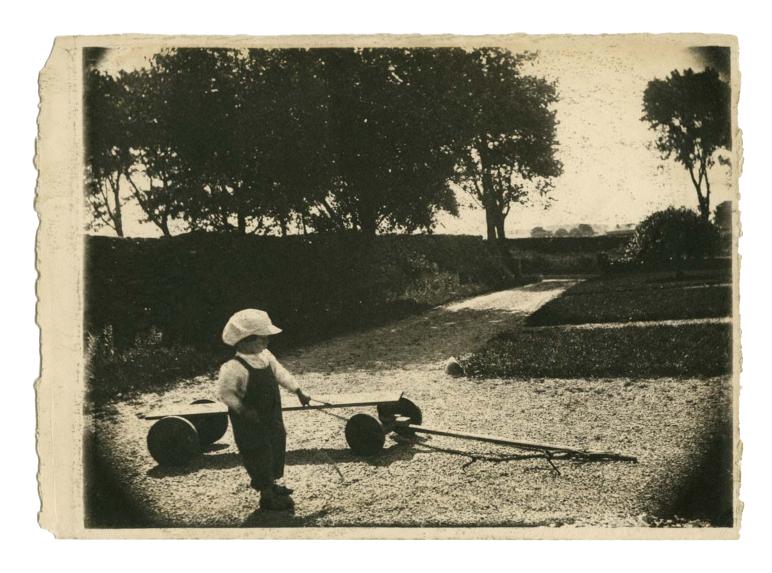
THE GOLDEN AGE.
Gum bichromate print, 1903,
on two pieces of joined paper.



Grandfather Eduard Käsebier,
Hermine and Charles.
Platinum print, ca. 1904.



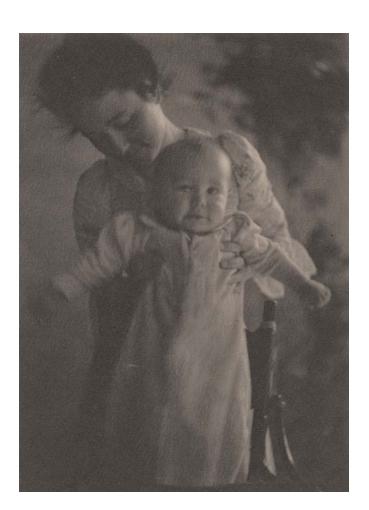
13
Bath Time.
Platinum print, ca. 1900.



14
Charles in White Cap.
Gum bichromate print, ca. 1903.



THE STILL WATER.
Platinum print, ca. 1904.



Gertrude O'Malley and Son Charles. Platinum print, ca. 1900.

17 Charles Pulling his Wagon. Gum bichromate print, ca. 1903.



18 The Baseball Player. Platinum print, ca. 1904.



19 *The Fireman.*Glycerin platinum print, ca. 1904.





*Charles Explores a Cabinet.*Platinum print, ca. 1904.



*Headwaiter.*Platinum print, ca. 1904.

CHECKLIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS

Commonly accepted titles appear in Capitals. Descriptive titles in *Italics*.

All photographs are vintage photographs by Gertrude Käebier, except for number 1.

I Gertrude Käsebier and her Grandson Charles.
Attributed to Hermine Käsebier Turner.
Platinum print, ca. 1904.
Size of image: 6½ x 8½ inches. [15.6 x 21 cm.]
Inscribed 'Gertrude Käsebier-/Grandson/Charles F.
O'Malley/Oceanside L.I. N.Y.' in ink in unidentified hand on verso.

2 The Road to Rome.

Gum bichromate print, ca. 1903. Size of image: 6½ x 8½ inches. [16.5 x 21.6 cm.] Lifetime exhibitions: London, 1904; New York, February, 1906; Brooklyn. 1929.

3 HAPPY DAYS.

Platinum print, ca. 1903.

Size of image: 8 x 6¼ inches. [20.3 x 15.9 cm.] Lifetime literature: *Camera Work* 10, April, 1905, pl. 11. Lifetime exhibitions: Pittsburgh, 1904; Vienna, 1905; Portland, 1905; New York, 1905–1906; Cincinnati, 1906; Philadelphia, 1906; Buffalo, 1910; Brooklyn, 1929.

4 Gertrude O'Malley and her Son Charles on the Porch. Platinum print, 1900.

Size of image: 8¼ x 5½ inches. [21 x 13 cm] Lifetime literature: J.P. Mowbray, "The Making of a Country Home," *Everybody's Magazine*, Vol. IV, No.1, February 1901, p. 101.

5 Hermine Käsebier Turner and her Nephew Charles. Platinum print, ca. 1903. Size of image: 5¾ x 8½ inches. [14.6 x 20.6 cm.]

6 GERTRUDE O'MALLEY AND CHARLES O'MALLEY, NEWPORT, R.I.

Platinum print, 1903.

Size of image: 6¼ x 8½ inches. [15.9 x 20.6 cm.]
Inscribed 'Gertrude O'Malley/Son Charles F.' in ink in unidentified hand on verso.

7 CHARLES F. O'MALLEY.

Platinum print, ca. 1905.

Size of image: 9¾ x 6¾ inches. [24.8 x 17.2 cm.] Inscribed 'Charles F. O'Malley' in ink in unidentified hand on verso.

8 The Picture Book. Platinum print, 1903. Size of image: 6 x 8 inches. [15.25 x 20.3 cm.]

Lifetime literature: *Camera Work* 10, April, 1905, pl 7. Lifetime exhibitions: New York, February, 1906; Buffalo, 1910.

9 Gertrude O'Malley Holding her Son Charles. Glycerin platinum print, 1900. Size of image: 6% x 3% inches. [16.2 x 9.2 cm] Lifetime literature: J.P. Mowbray, "The Making of a Country Home," Everybody's Magazine, Vol. IV, No.1, February 1901, p. 104.

10 Raking the Garden [Charles O'Malley]. Platinum print, ca. 1904. Size of image: 7% x 3% inches. [18.7 x 9.2 cm.] Inscribed 'Charles F' in ink in unidentified hand on verso.

II THE GOLDEN AGE.

Gum bichromate print, 1903, on two pieces of joined paper. Size of image: 6½ x 7 inches. [16.5 x 17.8 cm] Charcoal drawing on verso. Lifetime exhibitions: New York, February,1906; Phliadelphia, 1906.

- **12** *Grandfather Eduard Käsebier, Hermine and Charles.* Platinum print, ca. 1904. Size of image: 6 x 8 inches. [15.25 x 20.3 cm.]
- 13 Bath Time [Gertrude & Joseph O'Malley, their Son Charles, and Hermine Käsebier Turner]. Platinum print, ca. 1900.
 Size of image: 6½ x 6½ inches. [16.5 x 16.5 cm]

14 Charles in White Cap. Gum bichromate print, ca. 1903. Size of image: 6½ x 8½ inches. [15.9 x 21 cm.] Inscribed 'Charles F. O'Malley/Newport, R.I.' in ink in unidentified hand on verso.

15 The Still Water. Platinum print, ca. 1904. Size of image: 6¼ x 8¼ inches. [15.9 x 21 cm.] Lifetime exhibition: New York, February, 1906.

16 *Gertrude O'Malley and Son Charles.* Platinum print, ca. 1900. Size of image: 8 x 5¾ inches. [20.3 x 14.6 cm.]

17 Charles Pulling His Wagon. Gum bichromate print, ca. 1903. Size of image: 6½ x 8½ inches. [15.9 x 21 cm.] Inscribed 'Charles F. O'Malley/Newport, R.I.' in ink in unidentified hand on verso.

18 The Baseball Player[Charles O'Malley]. Platinum print, 1904. Size of image: 6 x 81/8. inches [15.25 x 20.6 cm.] Inscribed 'Charles F. O'Malley 1904/Oceanside, L.I. N. Y.' in ink on verso.

19 The Fireman [Charles O'Malley]. Glycerin platinum print, ca. 1904. Size of image: 6¾ x 8¾ inches. [17.2 x 21.3 cm.]

20 Charles Explores a Cabinet. Platinum print, ca. 1904. Size of image: 8½ x 6½ inches. [21 x 15.6 cm.]

2I Head Waiter [Charles O'Malley].
Platinum print, ca. 1904.
Size of image: 7% x 6 inches. [20 x 15.25 cm.]

22 *Charles in the Garden.*Platinum print, ca. 1904.
Size of image: 6¾ x 5½ inches. [17.2 x 14 cm.]

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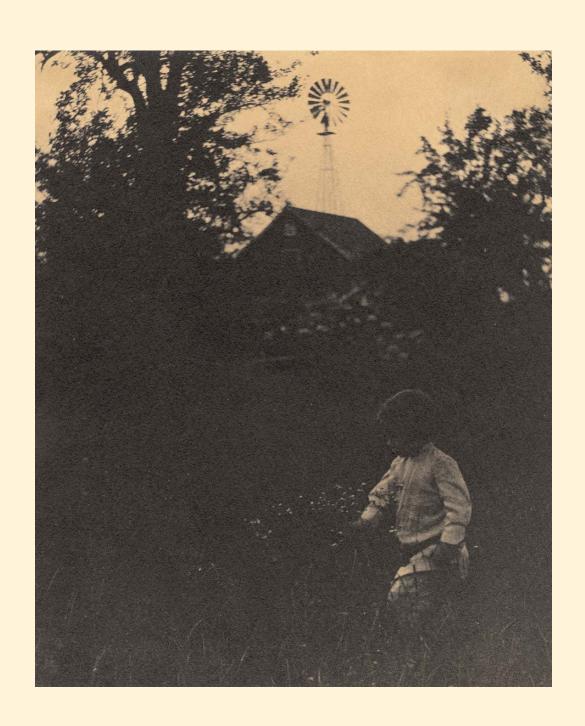
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Charles in the Garden. Platinum print, ca. 1904.



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