

Self-Guide

All in the Family

Love them or loathe them, families and family get-togethers are simply a part of life, especially during the holiday season. So bring your brood, collect your kin, and follow this family-filled tour through the collection.



GALLERY 101

Buddhist Votive Stele (535–557 A.D.), China

This monumental Buddhist tablet or stele was certainly a family affair. A long text carved on one side tells us that members of a military clan named Ning, rich and poor alike, all pitched in to hire artists to carve the stone. The families erected the stone in the courtyard of a Buddhist monastery to both honor the memory of their ancestors and express their religious devotion. Beneath images from the life of the Buddha and other deities, the names of donors are listed, and the most prominent patrons are depicted. The inscribed petition, “Let there be happiness and official appointments,” reveals the family’s wish for spiritual merit and public prestige.



GALLERY 50

Twin Commemorative Figures (Ere Ibeji) (early/mid-20th century), Yoruba

The Yoruba people of Nigeria have an extremely high rate of twin births. In the 19th century, the Yoruba of the Oyo region came to regard twins, called *ibeji*, as spirit children who became powerful deities upon death. When a twin died, the mother was advised to have a figure, called an *ere ibeji*, carved to commemorate the departed child. The *ere ibeji* was cared for by the mother or other close relatives as the child would have been; it was washed, adorned with beads, dressed, fed, spiritually cooled with blue dye, danced with, sung to, lulled to sleep, and awakened in the morning. Softening of sculptural details on the Art Institute’s figures reveal that they were affectionately cared for by their family.



GALLERY 154

Wall Fragment from the Tomb of Thenti (2524–2400 B.C.), Egypt

Think you’ve got it bad going to a few family get-togethers a year—how would you like to be stuck at one for eternity? The tombs of ancient Egypt are lined with scenes of family-filled banquets, meant to nourish the deceased in the afterlife. Living relatives supplemented these immovable feasts with actual food offerings in their ancestors’ tombs. This relief fragment shows the judge and scribe Thenti with his wife, son, and granddaughter at a table piled high with bread. Sharing the adult proportions of their elders, the children’s youth is represented by their relatively smaller size. The granddaughter on the left additionally sucks her finger, a gesture conventionally associated with young children in Egyptian art.



GALLERY 267

***The Holy Family with the Infant Christ Pressing the Wine of the Eucharist* (1485/1525), Southern Netherlands**

Many depictions of the Holy Family, such as those in galleries 204, 205, and 208, present mother and child in loving embrace while Joseph looks tenderly on. This Renaissance tapestry of the young family, however, evokes a much graver mood. The reflection in the central orb of the infant's hand pointing to the cross and his crushing of grapes evoke Christ's predestined sacrifice and the transubstantiation of his blood into wine during the Eucharist. Looking directly ahead, as if at the viewer, the young Christ appears to calmly confront his fate, while Mary and Joseph, with their hooded eyes and somber expressions, seem to already mourn their son.



GALLERY 168

***Mrs. John Nicholson (Hannah Duncan) and John Nicholson, Jr.* (1790) by Charles Willson Peale**

For American portraitist and natural history museum founder Charles Willson Peale, family and work went hand in hand. Married three times and the father of 11 children, Peale named many of his offspring after famous artists—Rembrandt, Rubens, Raphaelle, Titian—and taught them all painting and horticultural skills. Eager to share his parenting tips, in 1812 Peale penned “An Essay to Promote Domestic Bliss,” in which he emphasized lenient child rearing and a strong connection to nature for mother and child. This portrait of Mrs. John Nicholson and her son, touching tenderly and smiling naturally, embodies such ideals. The mother's soft, loose hair and dress and the child's clasped sprig of flowers further suggest the pair's bond with nature.



GALLERY 219

***Milton Dictating to His Daughter* (1794) by Henry Fuseli**

Though heralded as one of the greatest English poets, John Milton is not remembered as the best family man. Immediately after their wedding, his first wife ran back to her family home and stayed there many years before reconciling with her husband. The couple's three daughters reportedly felt little love for their father, complaining that he exploited and demeaned them. In his blindness, he taught the girls to copy down his Latin dictations but never to understand the words they wrote. It's not surprising then that painter Henry Fuseli, a friend of the early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, chose a dictation scene as one of the subjects of his Milton series of paintings. Known for his ghoulish literary scenes, Fuseli casts the blind poet as the monster in this story.

Make the most of your family time this holiday season!

Join in family fun at the Art Institute's Holly Days: Around the World, December 27–30, and enjoy drop-in workshops, gallery tours, and storytelling. Families will also find plenty of fun-filled adventures at the Chicago Children's Museum, now featuring the special interactive exhibition *Snow Much Fun*. For more information, visit www.chicagochildrensmuseum.org.