

# The Soul of the Child

*Margarita Thurn*

“Vestis virum reddit”. The timeless expression, the German translation of which is *Kleidung machen Leute*, (in English roughly translated as “you are what you wear”), and which is still used in common parlance today, was taught as a rule of conduct already during the life of Quintilian, the Roman rhetorician. It refers to the construction and definition of one’s own identity through the clothes one wears. As a visual vocabulary, clothing externally enhances the significance of the body and constructs its identity within a social environment. This expression may well be applied to the most recent of Zenita Komad’s work, in which canvases are dressed in items of clothing.

A pink-coloured fustanella, which the label Jacadi unmistakably identifies as an item of children’s fashion, clothes the canvas. The image carrier becomes the body, the naked upper half of which projects outwards between the carriers of the garment. The legs dangle beneath the dress, similarly clad in pink, pinstriped trousers and shoes, which rather resemble men’s clothing and thus, due to their disaffinity, induce an alienating effect. Not unlike the coloured layers of a painting, the picture is clad in several items of clothing, whereby the process of picture production is contrasted with the act of dressing.

With the Jacadi dress, Zenita Komad has created another spatially embracing picture, which she has vitalised and invested with a distinctive personality. It is another fantastic fairytale-like figure which, along with the other creations and forms of installation, inhabits the world of her powerful imagination. In the figure of a little girl, exuding the image of innocence and naivety, this is compelled to assert itself amongst all the other characters and the omniscient quotes. One can very well imagine how the various creatures become independent beings during the night and how, no sooner than they are left alone and darkness falls, they begin conversing with one another. Everything revolves around the little one – the older and wiser encourage her and are attentive to her needs, Louis Bourgeois cares for her with grandmotherly tenderness conveying to her springs of wisdom for along the way, whereas Maria Callas tells of the defining points of mankind and, in whispering tones, discloses the mysteries of life. While still an innocent, unspoilt girl, she represents at the same time a projection surface for the desires and hopes of the adult world.

Initially, the delicate pastel colours reflect the ideal of the child, its innocence and purity. However, a second glance shifts the first feelings of blamelessness and tenderness. In view of the larger-than-life sized body and imposing presence, the childlike image’s grace and charm disappears. Through the reversal of large and small, the viewer himself slips into the role of victim. Finally, the incomplete condition of the piece of clothing makes itself known – the lower half of the dress remains unpainted and, hence, incomplete, as if pointing to a dark side. The hanging on the wall also induces a sense of unease. Without being consulted, the childlike being is hung on the wall, and with the ground thus taken from beneath its feet, it now assumes the semblance of a helpless marionette. Hence, the lifeless dangling legs become a decisive element, creating from this captivating, pink little girl a helpless creature, engulfed by the dress, right before the eyes of the viewer. Perhaps, it alludes to the consequences of vanity for which we must atone. The dress has a life of its own and consumes the sinner, until his soul suffocates entirely. Dante could find no better form of punishment.

Should one choose to refrain from the superstitious and religious approaches, one then encounters psychoanalytical approaches.

As a second skin, the dress forms the limit between the physical body and the spiritual, psychological being. While expressing several things about the person, since “you are what you wear”, it also conceals the person. With respect to fundamental human needs, it becomes a technique for evoking self-assurance – and the image of the self. Much like a covering which is put on, it creates an identity and projects a specific outward image. Thus, in a very removed sense, dress is representative of the educational apparatus as a whole, which exercises a formative influence on the individual by the imposition of commands and prohibitions, by ideas of values and norms as well as of moral convictions going back to childhood. This constructed entity shrouds the inner life of the soul entirely and suppresses inner drives, desires, intuitions and emotions.

This ambivalence between the inner and the outer self divides the individual already at the tender age of childhood. The soul of the child – or the little person, who dwells within us – is buried beneath layers of structures and superstructures, until all elements of childlike consciousness and feelings slip down into the unconscious.

Were one ever to hold up the Jacadi dress, then the little person referred to would appear, but since one never does, it remains concealed forever.

It is in this way that the tragic, victimized ego is held up to us as a warning.

My child, here are things,  
whether small, whether large, whether few,  
packed in such a way  
that you cannot crack them like nuts.  
How do you intend setting about finding  
the shortcut to fathoming human beings?  
You only know them from without.  
What you espy is the waistcoat, not the heart.  
*Appearance and Reality (Wilhelm Busch)*

Mein Kind, es sind allhier die Dinge,  
Gleichwohl, ob große, ob geringe,  
Im wesentlichen so verpackt,  
Daß man sie nicht wie Nüsse knackt.  
Wie wolltest du dich unterwinden,  
Kurzweg die Menschen zu ergründen.  
Du kennst sie nur von außenwärts.  
Du siehst die Weste, nicht das Herz.  
*Schein und Sein (Wilhelm Busch)*