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Exhibition Review

How to Cite: Mendonça, P 2016 *The Fallen Woman*, The Foundling Museum, London 25 September 2015–03 January 2016. *Studies in the Maternal*, 8(1): 8, pp. 1–5, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.16995/sim.213>

Published: 25 May 2016

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Studies in the Maternal*, which is a journal published by the *Open Library of Humanities*.

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EXHIBITION REVIEW

The Fallen Woman, The Foundling Museum, London 25 September 2015 – 03 January 2016

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The Foundling Hospital, nestled in the bosom of London's Bloomsbury, was not only the UK's first children's charity, but also it was England's first public art gallery. Founded by the philanthropist Thomas Coram in 1739, with support from the artist William Hogarth and the composer George Frideric Handel, the Foundling Hospital was set up to care for babies 'at risk of abandonment'. Today, the Foundling Museum sits on the original hospital site where around 25,000 children were cared for and educated between 1741 and 1954.

The museum's latest exhibition *The Fallen Woman* is curated by the art historian Professor Lynda Nead. It offers remarkable insights into the lives and treatment of the unmarried women who, often in desperate circumstances, applied to have their babies accepted into the hospital during the mid-19th century. Victorian Britain, with the rise of the cities and widespread poverty, could be an unforgiving place for anyone considered to be morally, socially or ethnically deviant. Fears about the reproductive capacities of the poor (and of disabled people) fuelled policies attempting to stop the perceived decline of the human race. Having one's baby accepted by the Foundling Hospital saved the illegitimate child from being raised in the workhouses, and enabled the mother to at least attempt to regain some respectability, and, therefore, have improved life chances.

Today the original documents from the hospital archive, with their old-fashioned formal language, and carefully inked handwriting, are displayed alongside artworks from the period that explore the theme of the fallen woman. The artists, mostly male, include George Elgar Hicks and George Smith, whose paintings show the Victorian

family ideal: the contented, married mother in the home with her well-dressed children. The tone of the imagery changes dramatically, as we see a fascination with the seduction of the vulnerable, sexually innocent, young, unmarried woman. The show includes extraordinary caricatures and stereoscopes with before-and-after scenes, leaving viewers with no doubt about the fate of the unmarried mother. Frederick Walker's *The Lost Path* (1863), shows a mother with her baby walking alone through a snow storm presumably destined for prostitution, disease and death. Particularly powerful is Frank Holl's Study for *Deserted – A Foundling* (1874), which shows a poor woman watching in despair as a policeman comforts the baby she has just abandoned. A mother's jump to her death from London Bridge is chillingly drawn in Cruikshank's *A destitute girl throws herself from a bridge, her life ruined by alcoholism* (1848). In the same room, we see a petition to the Foundling Hospital from a mother who claims that the father of her child offered to help her take her own life, upon hearing that she was pregnant.

The show is careful to point out that not all unmarried mothers were forced into destitution, as the myth of the fallen woman suggests. Some were supported by their families; some, who later married, were able to regain respectability. In the exhibition leaflet, Professor Margaret Reynolds helpfully reminds us, that we need to distinguish between what went on in real life, and what was portrayed in the fiction, poetry and art of the time. However, the documents exhibited here reveal that while the care provided to children may have been warm and loving, the Foundling Hospital operated a cold and punishing system in order to judge unmarried women, and therefore their babies, as either deserving or undeserving of charity support. The fathers were not subject to such harsh assessments, or to the sudden change in circumstances brought about by the arrival of a baby.

In the mid-19th century, if a woman wanted to have her baby admitted to the hospital, she had to first collect an application form from the Porter's Lodge. The porter documented her visit and sometimes included her physical appearance as part of his notes. Many of the women of this time were illiterate so would have had the additional challenge of finding someone both sympathetic and educated to help them complete the form.

The application was then considered by a male-only interview panel who would interrogate the woman petitioner about her background and conception. The documents on display show that the questions asked included: 'What was the occupation of your parents? Where did you reside when you were seduced and what led to your seduction? Was the criminal intercourse repeated? Did you inform the father of your pregnancy and what was his answer? How have you supported yourself since? Who will give you a character [reference]? Is your child healthy? Is it a child of colour?' Many of the petitions displayed here describe violent sexual assault. Following the interview, the Hospital Enquirer would investigate the case. This included checking doctor's notes for evidence of previous pregnancies or STDs. Charlotte Parker's application, for example, was rejected in 1851 because it was judged by the Hospital Enquirer that her story included 'lies and contradictions' regarding her relationship with the father (quote from Hospital Enquirer notes). Moreover, Steve Lewinson's sound installation *Fallen Voices*, chillingly echoes through the room in response to the materials on display.

In 1856, 43 women had their applications accepted and 60 had them rejected. Now, the original petitions sit in tidy piles within a perfectly polished cabinet. One can only wonder what happened to those women and children who were not successful, and to the large numbers of women who had collected forms from the Porter's Lodge but perhaps were never heard of again. And what of the sexuality, disability and race of the women, what happened to the babies that were not white? Those who were sick or disabled?

The Fallen Woman is an extraordinary show, bringing to life the experiences and agency of the women who applied to have their babies taken into the Foundling Hospital. As Nead points out, women needed to present a particular kind of conception story in order to have their petitions accepted, and therefore what we see here are accounts of women's lives that may have been constructed in order to meet the criteria of the hospital. Likewise, the transcripts presented here may not be an accurate representation of the petitioners' actual words. These documents tell us about the value systems and power structures of the time, and the ways that women attempted to negotiate them in order to survive. This show informs and challenges us, leaving audiences to draw their own conclusions.

The inclusion of the first frames from David Lean's *Oliver Twist*, showing a young woman in labour desperately trying to make it to the ominous looking work-house, reminds us that the image of the outcast pregnant woman continued into 20th-century visual culture. I wonder what an exhibition would be like that connects this history to the present, exploring issues of contemporary conception, pregnancy, mothering and childhood, through documentation, artwork and direct engagement with those with lived experience. Jane Robinson's *In the Family Way: Illegitimacy Between the Great War and the Swinging Sixties* suggests that today, outside of certain ethnic and religious minorities, 'society does not generally regard this problem as a moral one. It remains an economic concern.'¹

As I share a chocolate coconut macaroon with my thriving yet fatherless little family in the Foundling Museum Cafe, I wonder whether a single pregnant woman is, in fact, still, in some instances, a challenge to the morality of our society. Do we really accept the working class single mother who has children from many different fathers? Do we all truly welcome the practice of conceiving via donor sperm/egg and donor sperm? And what about intentional conception via a one-night stand? Or conception from an affair with a married man? As I reflect on the show I have just seen, I realise that while so much has changed for women in Britain, some of the questions asked by the 19th-century Foundling Hospital committee are in fact questions that, I too, have been asked. For some, it seems, the pregnant, single woman still represents an uncomfortable challenge to the married, nuclear, heterosexual family ideal. As leave, I notice that the Foundling Museum now also promotes itself as a wedding venue.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

1 Jane Robinson, *In the Family Way: Illegitimacy Between the Great War and the Swinging Sixties* (London: Penguin Group, Viking, 2015), p. 283.

How to cite this article: Mendonça, P 2016 *The Fallen Woman*, The Foundling Museum, London 25 September 2015 – 03 January 2016. *Studies in the Maternal*, 8(1): 2, pp. 1–5, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.16995/sim.213>

Published: 25 May 2016

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