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A 15th Century “Bambino” is the Symbol of Global Maternal and Child Health

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Having observed similar swaddled infants, often referred to as “Bambini” as the insignia of many Maternal and Child Organizations (Fig. 1), we were intrigued by what would have encouraged organizations from different countries to use this symbol. We seek to show that this choice was likely influenced by a large global movement.

The insignia is derived from one of the fifteenth century terra cotta bas-reliefs from Andrea Della Robbia [1, 2]. The ten “Bambini” can still be seen on the facade of the “Ospedale degli Innocenti” in Florence, Italy (Fig. 2 for a set of two). The first of its kind, this Foundling Hospital of the Renaissance symbolizes the beginning of a humanistic movement to protect infants and children [1]. Movements advocating for child protection emerged in the XIX century, and were reinforced by the needs created by World War I [3]. Major child health organizations were founded in the immediate aftermath. The Save the Children International Union (SCIU) (Union Internationale de Secours aux Enfants), a Geneva-based organization, was founded in 1920 at the initiative of the Save the Children Fund (SCF) and the Swiss Committee for Children Relief (Comité Suisse de Secours aux Enfants) to implement child protection all over the world [4]. Eglantyne Jebb (1876–1928) and her sister Dorothy Buxton (1881–1962) played a central role in founding the SCF in England in May 1919 [5]

and the SCIU. One of the main achievements of the SCIU was precisely the adoption of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, or the “Declaration of Geneva,” which was approved by the Fifth Assembly of the League of Nations in 1924 and is the precursor to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted on November 20, 1989 [5, 6]. Between 1923 and 1933, the SCIU had members from 33 countries and nine affiliated organizations [7, 8]. In the United States (US), Save the Children was created in 1932 as the “International Save the Children Fund of America” and became a member of the SCIU [9]. The name of the US organization was changed to the “Save the Children Federation” in 1939 [9] and is now known as “Save the Children USA.” [10]

One of Della Robbia’s “Bambini” was chosen as the insignia by SCIU and the majority of its members and associate member organizations (Fig. 1) [7, 8]. It appeared on the 1924 Declaration of Geneva (Fig. 3) [11]. Other “Bambini” were chosen at the same period. It was the case of the Save the Children Federation and it is probably the inspiration for the current logo of Save the Children (personal communication, Save the Children, 2005). In Belgium, the National Children’s Relief Organization (Oeuvre Nationale de l’Enfance, Nationaal Werk voor Kinderwelzijn) used a “Bambino” since 1924, but became member of the SCIU only in 1942 [12]. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) adopted a “Bambino” as insignia around 1930, modified it in 1941, and made it official in 1955 [2]. Several Latin American pediatric societies have followed AAP in adopting the “Bambino.” For example, the Brazilian Pediatric Society started using a “Bambino” in 1936 [13].

The “Bambini” vary by their degree of swaddling. Swaddling is described in the Bible and was widely used in Europe, Asia, and South America [14, 15]. Among the 10 original “Bambini” of the “Ospedale degli Innocenti”,

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Fig. 1 Insignia of the American Academy of Pediatrics (first row) [2]. Insignia of two member associations of the Save the Children International Union: Comité Suisse de Secours aux Enfants and American Committee for Relief of Russian Children (second row) [7, 8]



Fig. 2 Facade of the “Ospedale degli Innocenti” in Florence, Italy with two Della Robbia “Bambini” (photo credit P. Humblet)

seven were completely swaddled and three were partially swaddled. The SCIU chose a partially swaddled “Bambino” as its symbol; it was seen as a “sign of hope” and “an appeal to the ‘nature’ of the child” and to its rights to a childhood [5]. The original AAP “Bambino” was swaddled, with only the feet being unbound. However, by the mid twentieth century, swaddling was not a recommended practice anymore, and AAP modified the original insignia [2, 15]. The current AAP “Bambino” is an Andrea Della Robbia bas-relief, but the only one with legs and feet not swaddled (Fig. 1) [2].



Fig. 3 Declaration of Geneva (Déclaration de Genève) [11]

Interestingly enough, in the US the “Bambino” appearance evolved during its history showing signs of starvation after World War I and becoming chubby later on. The American Committee for Relief of Russian Children, which was created to collect funds during the Russian famine of 1921 and became an associate member of the SCIU in 1923, modified the shared insignia to show it with signs of starvation (Fig. 1) [7]. The first “Bambino” AAP used was also showing signs of starvation [2]. In 1941, the AAP replaced it by the current insignia, showing a well nourished chubby “Bambino” which was at the time considered more representative of the “American ideal of a young child.”[1]

Insignia with swaddled “Bambino” remind us the massive effort for children’s relief launched after World War I which is a superb example of global cooperation, and should remain an inspiration to all of us 20 years after the adoption of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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