

# The Art of the Picture Book

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## PICTURE BOOKS AT AN ART MUSEUM

Once upon a time back in 1964 the Art Institute of Chicago opened an education space called the Junior Museum, with galleries, studios, and a little library of picture books for visitors to enjoy. What foresight the planners had to include a room full of books for children at an art museum. Thus began an era that still prevails almost a half century later. Speed ahead to 2007: a recent study with parents showed that the family library is still a favorite destination. This cozy space is a comfortable gathering spot where families can hang out and read, or where teachers can have some down time with their classes and share a story. It's a great place for storytelling programs and for hosting book signings by guest illustrators.

The collection of one thousand books written for young people includes titles on architecture, arts, artist biography, and historic cultures, as well as award-winning picture books that complement the museum's encyclopedic collection. Caldecott Medal and Honor books have been added to the collection since the 1960s and enjoyed by many museum visitors. The books have been used in a variety of ways through the years. For museum educators, finding that perfect story with pictures might be a jumping-off point for a hands-on activity. We at the museum can rely on the book collection for supplementary materials when preparing programs. A quick read of an artist's biography or a concise synopsis of the Italian Renaissance helps when preparing for tours or workshops. And the voice and language of the books are age-appropriate for young people, reminding new educators to keep talks engaging for young learners.

After the Junior Museum underwent renovation in 1992 to become the Kraft Education Center, a gallery was dedicated to the exhibition of original art from picture books, and since then the work of more than one hundred artists has been on view. The displays have had thematic links, have related to major museum exhibitions, and have featured award-winning illustrators. Picture book artists are dedicated to their profession and care about accuracy, character development, whimsy and humor, and mastery of media. They work in charcoal, graphite, acrylic, oil, and watercolor paint, and create woodblock prints, etchings, and collages, producing a series of original works of art just like the other masterpieces found in the museum's galleries. These exhibitions offer an opportunity for children to see original works of art geared toward them and to learn about the people who created them.

## PROGRAMS WITH PICTURE BOOKS

Families visit the museum to learn, have fun, and spend time together. Many children visiting the museum have been read to their entire lives and have a book collection at home. They may even be familiar with visits to the public library and have their own card. For our youngest audience (3–5-year-olds), a museum visit might not be a common experience, but it can be an exciting one. Museum educators understand that the workshops and gallery walks need to be engaging and interactive. Beginning with an activity that children are familiar with, such as reading a picture book, establishes a comfort zone for young children who are in a strange big place filled with things that cannot be touched. Following the reading, points of the story can be reinforced when looking at artworks in the galleries and then further reinforced with a hands-on activity in the studios. Parents, having had an opportunity to see picture books used in a museum setting, can talk over museum visits with their children and extend learning at home with stories.

Story Time is a popular Art Institute program for families that gathers a loyal crowd. The books and topics are open-ended and relate to works of art on display. For instance, after reading Lois Ehlert's *Market Day* (Harcourt, 2000) and identifying shapes and colors found on the pages of the book, children and parents can go on a hunt for shapes and colors in the galleries. At first they might keep it simple, looking for circles or the color red. Gradually they can add more colors and shapes as children become confident with looking at and discovering details in paintings. Or a reading of *The Stray Dog*, by Marc Simont (2002 Caldecott Honor Book; HarperCollins, 2001), can initiate a search for animals found in paintings and sculptures. A conversation between parents and children can start with questions such as Would you like to bring this animal home? What would you name it? What do you think it likes to eat? Questions based on points found in the story make the content of the story relevant to the original work of art.

Reading programs and the little library are excellent places for families to learn together in the museum. Picture books and books for young readers are also part of programs for students in school groups. Each year thousands of preschoolers and early elementary school students visit the museum. In the Art Institute's ABCs of Art program for children from pre-K through third grade, museum docents take goodie bags into the galleries packed with picture and illus-

trated books. Basic themes such as “Lines, Shapes, and Colors” and “My Five Senses” reinforce both verbal and visual literacy.

Reading programs also take place in the community. A successful partnership between the Art Institute and the Chicago Public Library, now in its seventh year, is called Art and Reading Together. Art and literature are thematically linked and are introduced to children and families in dynamic programming that takes place at library branches; the program culminates with a visit to the museum. This collaboration promotes creative program interplay and resource sharing and encourages young learners to find a wealth of possibilities in both a collection of books and a collection of art.

## LINKING THE MUSEUM’S COLLECTIONS

In 2006 the entire museum linked together its permanent collections by highlighting objects that came from or were influenced by travel and trade along the Silk Road. This series of routes stretched from the edge of China west to the Mediterranean Sea, encompassing most of Asia and parts of Africa and Europe. The museum education department used this opportunity to find beautifully illustrated stories for children on this topic. The picture book exhibition *Stories from the Silk Road* (August 2006–May 2007) included original paintings, drawings, and collages depicting brave explorers, diligent merchants, and religious men who journeyed the Silk Road routes to exchange goods, stories, and beliefs. Seven artists representing twelve books were on view during this yearlong celebration of the Silk Road. The family audience ranges in age from the very young to teenagers and adults, so books that appealed to all ages were necessary to communicate this theme. Two picture books especially appropriate for the young introduced the Silk Road topic in an understandable way. *We’re Riding on a Caravan: An Adventure on the Silk Road* (written by Laurie Krebs, Barefoot Books, 2005) used rhyming verses to describe a yearlong journey. Colorful watercolor pictures by Helen Cann illustrated the ever-changing terrain in this region of the world and the markets, goods, animals, and people who traveled these routes. An equally engaging resource was an alphabet book, *A is for Asia* (written by Cynthia Chin-Lee, Orchard Books, 1997). Yumi Heo’s large, playful paintings were whimsical delights filled with details and color that introduced this vast continent’s celebrations, costumes, languages, and inventions.

For older children, author and artist James Rumford wrote and illustrated *Traveling Man: The Journey of Ibn Battuta, 1325–1354* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001). Rumford shared the same passion for travel as his main character, and using a rich color palette, he wove calligraphy, maps, and imagery of Africa, India, and China together to portray this true story of a man who traveled 75,000 miles over twenty-nine years. The original paintings were more than twice the size of the book.

Demi has devoted her career to researching and producing beautifully illustrated books on the people, customs,

and stories found in the Silk Road region. On view were illustrations from her book *Chingis Khan* (Henry Holt, 1991), portraying the great (and ruthless) Mongol leader and military strategist who, during his long reign, made traveling the Silk Road safe again. The exquisite illustrations are reminiscent of Persian miniature paintings. Other Demi books represented include the biographies *Buddha* (Henry Holt, 1996), *Muhammad* (Margaret K. McElderry, 2003), and *The Adventures of Marco Polo* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982), giving visitors a rich introduction to the people and beliefs found in this region of the world. (A bibliography of books featured in this exhibition, along with many others, can be found in my article “Stories from the Silk Road,” *Book Links* 16, no. 1 [September 2006], available at <http://www.ala.org/Booklinks/> in the archive of online articles.)

## A FAMILY EXHIBITION

Telling and listening to stories are engaging activities. People tend to retain information when it’s delivered in story form. With this in mind the museum education department produced a family exhibition called *Telling Images: Stories in Art* (September 1996–January 2003). Six original works of art from diverse cultures and historical periods told stories in different ways. A goal was to show how objects and paintings from different cultures tell stories that have been passed down from generation to generation.

Two of the six original works of art on view were *St. George Killing the Dragon* by Bernardo Martorell (Spanish, c. 1400–1452) and *Rip Van Winkle* by John Quidor (American, 1801–1881). These stories have been retold and illustrated by many artists through time, including renowned picture book artists, enabling these works of art and the stories they recount to become meaningful to children today. A companion picture book exhibition called *A Story in a Picture: Illustrations* by Trina Schart Hyman and Gary Kelley (September 1996–February 1997) featured the illustrations from the 1985 Caldecott Medal book *Saint George and the Dragon* (retold by Margaret Hodges, Little, Brown, 1984). Hyman’s signature watercolor paintings were bracketed with red lattice frames, evoking the heroic Red Cross Knight. The red-framed borders were intertwined with flowers and grasses native to the English countryside, reminiscent of an illustrated manuscript. Hyman wanted to create an experience of looking and reading down to the finest detail as children traveled from page to page unfolding the drama of this tale. Gary Kelley created his own unforgettable interpretation of Washington Irving’s classic story in his book *Rip Van Winkle* (Creative Education, 1993), also showcased in this exhibition. Kelley carefully researched the Revolutionary War-era Dutch settlement of the Hudson River Valley, the story’s setting, to give his detailed illustrations a realistic yet dreamlike quality with a dramatic Gothic perspective.

Experiencing these narratives in picture books allows families and students to learn the content before or after see-

ing the original work of art in the galleries. Talking about the pictures seen in books allows children to express their viewpoints, learn new vocabulary words, and hear different perspectives, the same goals museum educators have when exploring works of art with museum audiences. These two paintings of St. George and Rip Van Winkle link directly to the written word and, if properly explored, can help children make the leap to interpreting artworks from other cultures that tell stories in different ways.

Also on view in *Telling Images* was an elephant tusk carved with stories that told about the history of the Edo people of Africa, and a sculpture of the Hindu god Vishnu that embodies avatars of Vishnu. Stories specifically related to each object were scripted and recorded for people to hear while looking at the artworks. Although this exhibition has been dismantled, the objects are still on view and these stories are used to teach audiences.

## HERITAGE INSPIRES THESE PICTURE BOOK ARTISTS

Jerry Pinkney entered the field of children's books in the 1960s when quality picture books about African Americans were scarce, and so he was determined to change this for future generations. Commitment to historical accuracy and distinctive watercolor paintings have remained his trademark and can be found on the pages of his reimagined folktales, stories of history, and legends of Africans and African American people, such as *Mirandy and Brother Wind* (1989 Caldecott Honor Book; written by Patricia C. McKissack, Knopf, 1988). Pinkney and author Gloria Jean Pinkney have collaborated on several books, and their son Brian has produced a number of award-winning picture books that have also been exhibited at the museum.

Peter Sis grew up in the city of Prague, Czechoslovakia, when it was under communist rule. He remembers being told as a child how to think and behave while creativity and expression were forbidden by the government. The repression and its repercussions left a lasting impression on this artist, and when Sis came to America, he began a prolific career researching, writing, and creating exquisite illustrations for books on heroes, explorers, and independent thinkers, such as Charles Darwin in *The Tree of Life* (Farrar Straus Giroux, 2003) and Galileo in *Starry Messenger* (1997 Caldecott Honor Book; Farrar Straus Giroux, 1996). Layers of detail and an impeccable handwritten script are combined into complex compositions. Seeing the original drawings and paintings can change the way you look at his books.

Ed Young interprets his stories and pictures with the heart of a poet, a philosopher, a mystic, and a teller of tales past and present. The experiences of his life growing up in Shanghai and Hong Kong permeate Young's books. His style of storytelling unveils the folklore of many cultures, particularly China's, through creation myths, poetry, rhyme, and classic and modern fairy tales such as *Lon Po Po: A Red-Riding Hood Story from China* (1990 Caldecott Medal; Philomel, 1989). Influenced by Chinese literature and folk art,

his illustrations employ vibrant colors and textures of cut paper, pastel, pen and ink, and charcoal.

## LET THE STORY SPEAK

Leo and Diane Dillon create pictures together. For more than forty years, this award-winning husband-and-wife team has been devoted to illustrating children's books. Together they choose the technique, medium, and style appropriate for each story, but they maintain separate studios on different floors of their home in Brooklyn, New York. As they work, they pass their illustrations back and forth until both are satisfied. Watercolor and pastels imitate the look of eighteenth-century Japanese woodblock prints to illustrate a popular Japanese folktale; fantastic creatures with absurd behaviors call to mind the artwork of the late-fifteenth-century Flemish artist Hieronymus Bosch; and their 2003 Coretta Scott King Honor Book, *Rap a Tap Tap: Here's Bojangles—Think of That!* (Blue Sky Press, 2002) was inspired by the art of Aaron Douglas, a famous painter of that period who was also a friend of Bojangles. Douglas painted overlapping color and shape; the Dillons used this technique to show the movement of the dancer's legs. Reading *To Every Thing There Is a Season* (Blue Sky Press, 1998) is like visiting a museum. The pages of the book present a different style of art for every verse, including examples from Egyptian, Greek, and Japanese cultures.

Paul O. Zelinsky believes that different writing calls for different pictures and that the words of a story tell him how the illustrations should look. His versatility has led him on an interesting path, retelling and illustrating classic fairy tales such as the 1998 Caldecott Medal book *Rapunzel* (Dutton, 1997); delving into the world of pop-up books with *The Wheels on the Bus* (Dutton, 1990); and interpreting a story rhyme found in the notebook of a school teacher from 1897, charmingly titled *The Maid and the Mouse and the Odd-Shaped House* (Dodd, Mead, 1981).

## THE CALDECOTT AWARD

The awarding of the Caldecott Medal is a remarkable system that allows a team of librarians and experts in the field of children's literature to recognize exemplary artists each year and ensure that their books are guaranteed to stay in print and available to children for generations to come.

Although the book was published more than sixty years ago, readers familiar with Robert McCloskey's 1942 Caldecott Medal winner *Make Way for Ducklings* (Viking, 1941) can't help but think of that book when they see a family of ducks walking down the street in springtime. The fact that McCloskey studied ducks for two years by frequenting parks, visiting science museums, and eventually bringing sixteen ducks home to his apartment to live with him is an example of the dedication of picture book artists.

Ed Emberley created woodblock prints for each page of the 1968 Caldecott Medal winner *Drummer Hoff* (adapted

by Barbara Emberley, Prentice-Hall, 1967). The book was printed at a time when artists had to provide color-separated layers in black for the final printing. This meant that for each illustration, three black-toned drawings were made to indicate where the colors went. Anyone lucky enough to see first editions of early Caldecotts, especially McCloskey's or Emberley's, is in for a treat. The oversized ivory pages of McCloskey's book are printed in a sepia-toned ink, and Emberley's book was printed on a textured, toned paper, adding exciting dimension to the printed page.

## EDUCATE YOURSELF

Some artists are known for adapting their artistic style to suit the words of the story and have become masters of many different techniques and media including painting, printmaking, or drawing, and ink, watercolor, oil, charcoal, or pastel, depending on how they decide to interpret the story. Get a few books by the illustrators mentioned above and compare the art found in each. Look at the quality of line, color, and shape. Which illustrations were painted? Which were drawn with colored pencil or charcoal? Which do you prefer? By looking at and talking about the different illustrations you will become more confident having conversations about pictures with children.

What were your favorite books as a child? Why were these your favorites? To learn more about the different types of art found in picture books, begin with the award winners, especially those listed in this book. These artists have already been recognized by a Caldecott Committee; now it's up to you to discover why! Look at other books that they have produced to see a body of work by a single person. Research the artists by reading interviews and articles. Most contemporary picture book illustrators have websites or can be found on a publisher's site.

Learn terms and techniques and try to identify media as you look at pictures. Here are a few suggestions to get you started. Examine the lines in Chris Raschka's 2006 Caldecott Medal book *The Hello, Goodbye Window* (written by Norton Juster, Michael di Capua Books, 2005). Colorfully drawn squiggly lines are made with oil pastels. These look very different from the painted gouache lines of Kevin Henkes's 2005 Caldecott Medal book *Kitten's First Full Moon* (Greenwillow, 2004).

The process of printmaking was used by Mary Azarian in *Snowflake Bentley* (1999 Caldecott Medal; written by Jacqueline Briggs Martin, Houghton Mifflin, 1998) and by Eric Rohmann for *My Friend Rabbit* (2003 Caldecott Medal; Roaring Brook Press, 2002). Compare the look of these prints to another type of print called an etching, a technique used by Arthur Geisert for all of his books. Watercolors are a favorite medium for many artists. Examine David Wiesner's 2007 Caldecott Medal winner *Flotsam* (Clarion, 2006). His crisp, detailed compositions painted with watercolor have a different quality from Betsy Lewin's broader, more relaxed

brushstrokes in the hilarious *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type* (2001 Caldecott Honor Book; written by Doreen Cronin, Simon & Schuster, 2000).

These three Caldecott-winning collage artists handle their medium in slightly different ways. Steve Jenkins and Robin Page created *What Do You Do with a Tail like This?* (Houghton Mifflin, 2003) by piecing together precisely cut shapes proportionate to animal body parts. Simms Taback began with watercolor and gouache, and then collaged bits of patterned papers on top of his paintings in *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat* (Viking, 1999). Bryan Collier combined small cut papers from magazines, colored copies, and his own hand-painted elements in *Martin's Big Words* (written by Doreen Rappaport, Hyperion, 2001).

Use this foundation to decide what art media you prefer, which picture book artists are your favorite. Simple questions will help you articulate your responses and can be used to engage children in a discussion about art. Do you like these pictures? Why or why not? What words would you use to describe these images?

Experiment with art materials and your appreciation for an artist's technique will increase. Typically artists use pastels, charcoal, colored pencils, graphite, or a paint such as watercolor or gouache. A few use acrylic or oil paints. Look at books about illustration and drawing to learn the differences. These art materials are very accessible. Get a few and experiment. You'll see that watercolor, gouache paint, and inks can be unforgiving while oil or acrylic paint allows you to rework areas. Pastels and charcoal are dusty and challenging to contain on the paper surface but are fun to use.

Visit art museums or galleries to see original works of art. Have discussions about what you are seeing with a friend or colleague. Once you can articulate observations and interpretations you will be better equipped to discuss pictures with children, and children will begin to understand and appreciate that their beloved books are filled with pictures made especially for them.

## NOTE

The current exhibition of original picture book art at the Art Institute, *Improvisations: Picture Books* by Chris Raschka, will be on view until June 8, 2008. A selection of twelve of his books, including *The Hello, Goodbye Window* (2006 Caldecott Medal) and *Yo! Yes?* (1994 Caldecott Honor Book; Orchard, 1993), as well as illustrated poetry and books on musicians are featured. Chris Raschka is a master at creating and combining marks with brush, pencil, and pen. There is grace and presence to his shapes and lines as they dance and sway on the pages of his stories, which beg to be read out loud.

## RESOURCES

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views with picture book artists and regularly presents talks and hands-on workshops about the topic of picture book illustration to librarians, teachers, families, and, notably, at the 2006 National Art Education Association's annual conference. Erbach has a B.S. Ed. in art education from Northern Illinois University and an M.F.A. from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.