

Illustration as Art—Line

by Mary M. Erbach

The “Illustration as Art” series focuses on learning to look and being able to understand and articulate what is seen in works of art. This article focuses on how seven different artists use line. Line is a basic element of art and can communicate many things, from emotional expression to a place, an idea, or something more structured, such as a design or architecture plan.

Thick, thin, straight, jagged, short, repeated, blunt, choppy, long, curled, dark, light, soft, sharp, squiggly, tapered, fine, even, and exaggerated are some of the many types of lines used by artists to make pictures and portray ideas. Although some of the books in this article are geared toward preschool and primary readers and listeners, studying and discussing the pictures can be engaging for all ages. Older children want to know “how” to draw things. Examining single elements of art will help them see the structure of how something is put together. Examples of artwork below range from those that use only lines to illustrate a story to more complex compositions that combine line, color, and space.

Hands-On Learning

For “Hands-On Learning” activities designed to accompany a discussion of these books, visit the *Book Links* Web site at <http://www.ala.org/BookLinks> and click on “Web Connections.”

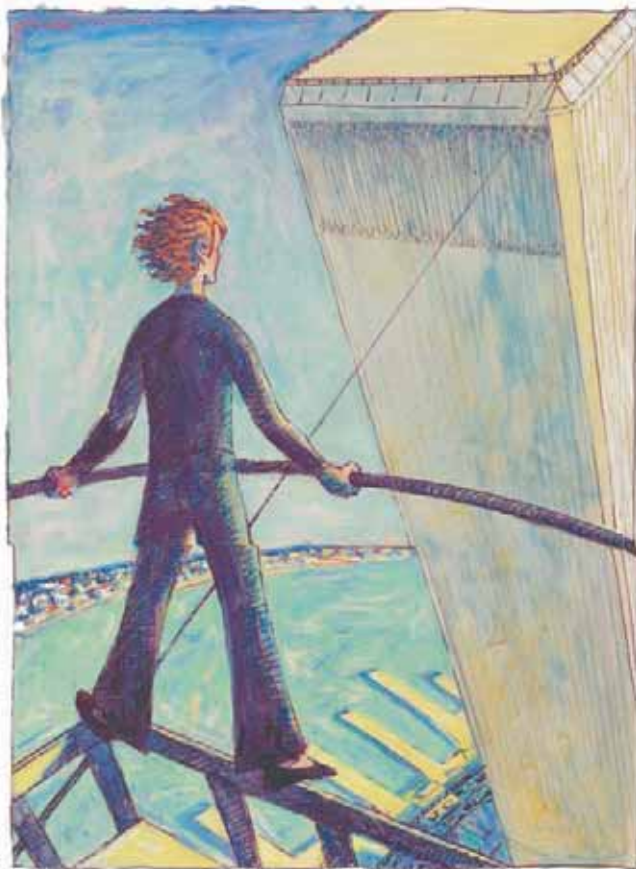
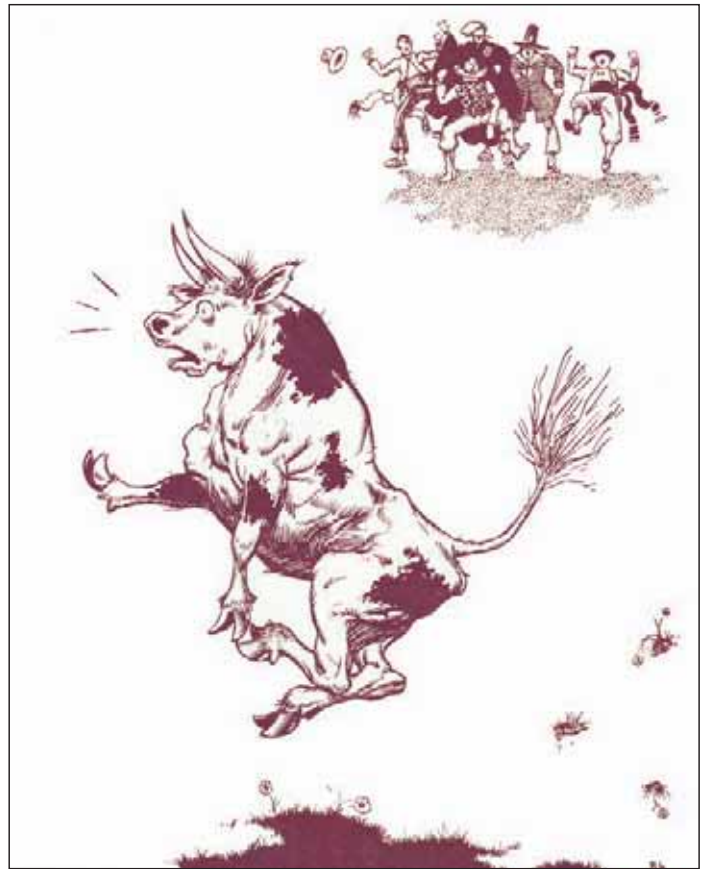


Ets, Marie Hall. *Gilberto and the Wind*. 1963. 32p. Puffin, paper, \$6.99 (9780140502763).

It is not necessary to show all the details in order for artwork to be visually engaging. Minimal marks illustrate this tale about a little boy named Gilberto who spends the day with the wind. Crisp black outlines the main character, while softer incomplete lines suggest the settings. The deep tone of the paper becomes the ground, sky, and Gilberto’s clothes, and the color white is used to emphasize the action of the wind in each scene. In this illustration the focus is the sail of a boat that is linked to the little boy’s hand by an angled line. Mirrored above is an inverted softer curve of a hill, balancing the composition. A few lines suggest a fence. Whites and blacks stretch across the water’s surface, and the sail is reflected in the ripples. Short wispy lines surrounding the pond and fence sway in the direction of the wind. Angled tree branches in the background help indicate that the air is moving.

Leaf, Munro. *The Story of Ferdinand*. Illus. by Robert Lawson. 1936. 72p. Viking, \$17.99 (9780670674244); Puffin, paper, \$7.99 (9780140502343).

More than 70 years old, the beloved story of the gentle bull from Spain is depicted through a variety of lines on a white background. Short repeating dashes define a horizon, add dimension to a figure, or create pattern. In this illustration the startled Ferdinand jumps into the air after suffering a bee sting. The contour line of his body is angular and jagged, punctuating a rigid mid-air pose. His hairs stand on end, and his eye is wide, the pupil a dot. Repeated rippled lines indicate flexed muscles. The solid shadow below is edged with wisps suggesting grass. In the background, fine lines detail the men jumping for joy, and tiny repeated dashes drawn carefully one next to the other represent shadows of the figures.



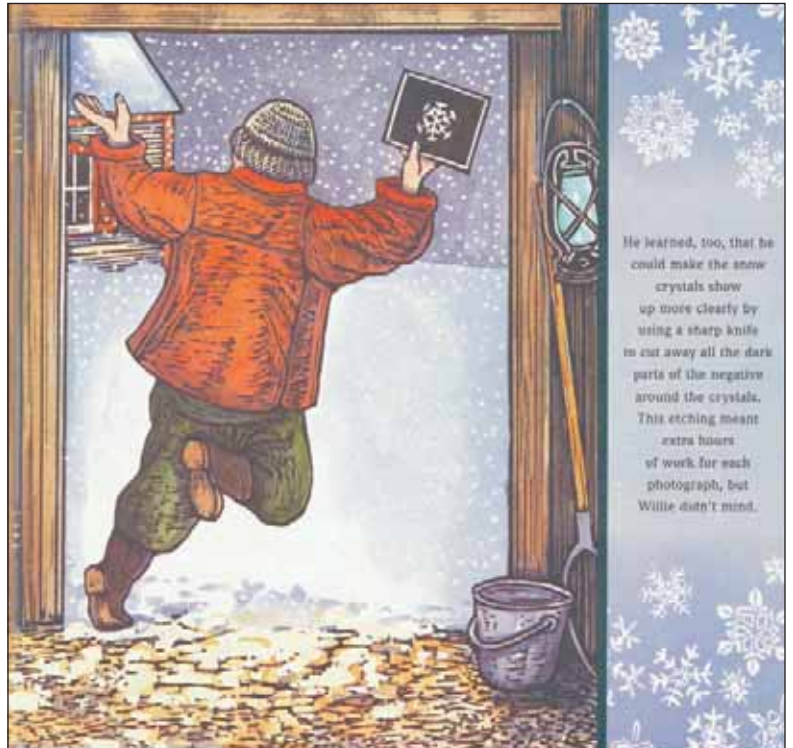
Gerstein, Mordicai. *The Man Who Walked between the Towers*. 2003. 40p. Roaring Brook, \$17.95 (9780761317913); Square Fish, paper, \$6.95 (9780312368784). Paperback available July 2007.

In this Caldecott Medal winner, Mordicai Gerstein uses oil paints and ink to illustrate a true story from the 1970s about a street performer who strings a tightrope between the Twin Towers in New York City and walks across. In this illustration, lines divide the page in several ways. The tightrope divides the picture diagonally, while Philippe's balancing pole cuts the illustration in half from left to right. Below, a horizon line of buildings curves around the water's edge, and dotted lines representing cars emphasize the distance between street level and the daring event taking place a quarter mile up in the air. Philippe's back is to the viewer as he stands on top of the skyscraper's rail, facing two very tiny figures on a rooftop across the way.

Martin, Jacqueline Briggs.
Snowflake Bentley. Illus. by Mary
Azarian. 1998. 32p. Houghton,
\$16 (9780395861622).

This Caldecott Medal-winning picture-book biography follows the life of Wilson Bentley, who discovered how to photograph the unique designs of snowflakes before they melted. Because the wood block printmaking process is so involved, Mary Azarian's work could be included in an article on technique, but it also focuses on line. For this story, a wood-block was made for each picture. In her woodcuts Azarian had to plan what lines would form each composition and then carve away everything except those lines. Printed in black on light-toned paper, each illustration was then hand-colored.

In this illustration invite children to find all the places where there are black lines: the plank walls of the shed, the folds in Bentley's clothing. The ground is flecked with black ink and white, brown, and tan shades of paint, creating a unique textured ground. White flakes dotting the gray sky outside were added later with a brush.



He learned, too, that he could make the snow crystals show up more clearly by using a sharp knife to cut away all the dark parts of the negative around the crystals. This etching meant extra hours of work for each photograph, but Willie didn't mind.

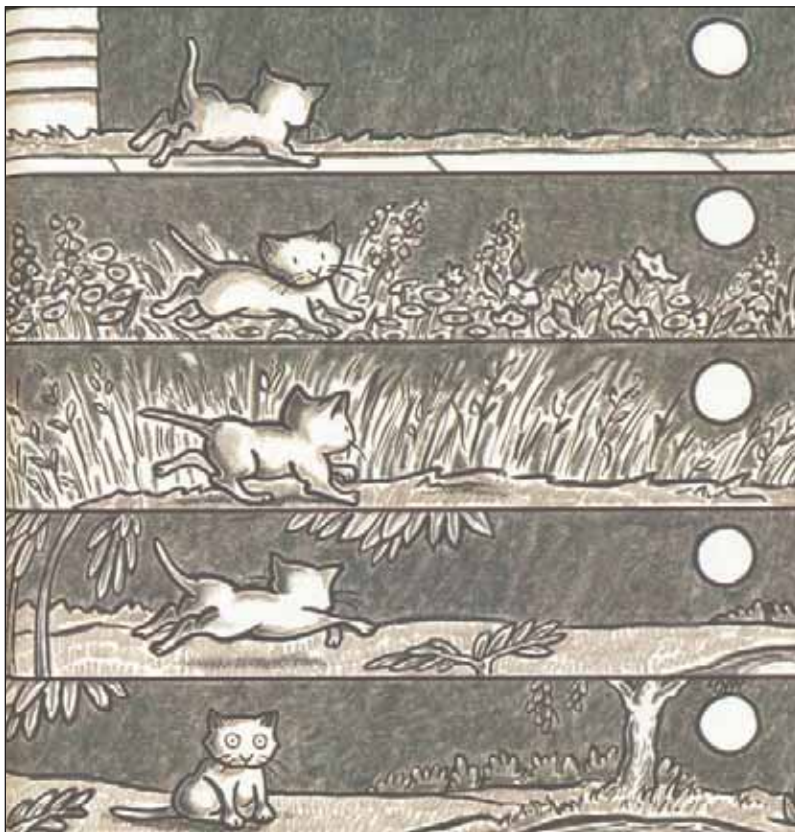
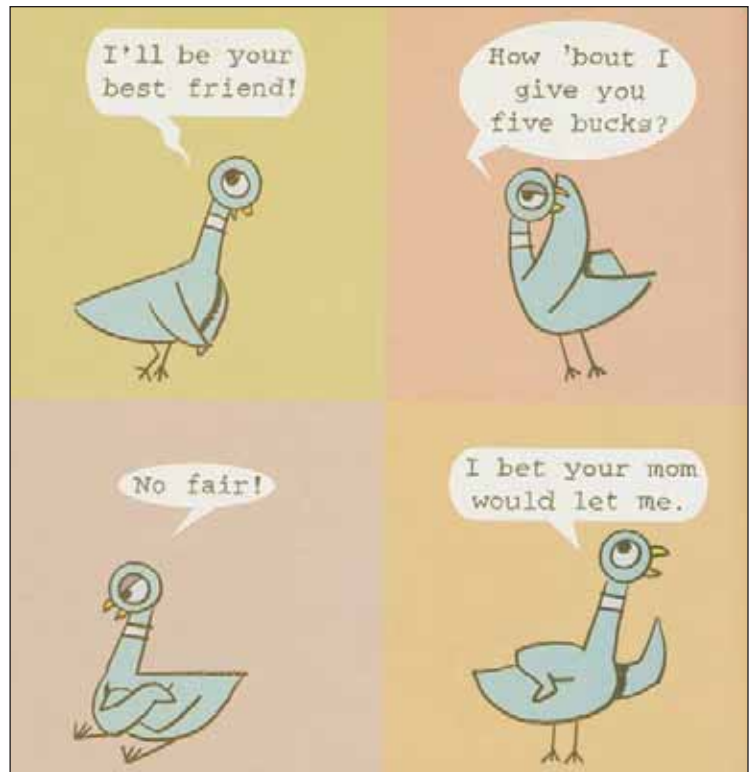


Stewart, Sarah. *The Gardener.* Illus. by David Small. 1997. 32p. Farrar, \$17 (9780374325176); Sunburst, paper, \$6.95 (9780374425180).

David Small is a skilled draughtsman who employs a variety of thick, thin, angled, curved, and staggered lines to create both indoor and outdoor scenes in this Caldecott Honor Book. A young girl travels from the country to the city during the Depression, bringing with her the gift of gardening. Confident drawings are relaxed and fresh, as if the artist went back in time and sketched what he saw. In this illustration car tires and bumpers are drawn with thick dark lines, anchoring the bottom of the page, and a few small circular lines in the street suggest a pebble road. On the second floor, Lydia Grace and Emma prune and water window boxes and planters filled with a few squiggles of black surrounded by color. The dark edge of the awning below brings attention to the window of the bakery, where people gather. Fine black lines colored with shades of pastels define much of the scene, including the architectural details of windows, doorways, fire escapes, and patches of brickwork.

Willems, Mo. *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* 2003. 40p. Hyperion, \$12.99 (9780786819881).

In this humorous Caldecott Honor Book, Mo Willems created simple drawings with clean, short, continuous marks that illustrate a personable, memorable bird. The artist also hand-lettered the text, almost a lost art today because of the possibilities offered by digital typesetting. On this page the pigeon is shown in four different depictions. Have children examine this character's various expressions and gestures. His round head and half-circle body don't alter much, but notice how the lines of his wings change direction: upright for a whisper, crossed for pouting, and sometimes bent to suggest elbows and hands. The pupil of the pigeon's eye also moves around, changes size, and is sometimes partially blocked by his eyelid, further reinforcing his mood.



Henkes, Kevin. *Kitten's First Full Moon.* 2004. 40p. Greenwillow, \$16.99 (9780060588281). Also available in Spanish.

In *Kitten's First Full Moon*, Kitten, outlined with a thick black line, sees the moon in the night sky for the first time and mistakes it for a bowl of milk. Caldecott Medal-winning Henkes painted shades of gray and black on warm white paper to depict the moonlit setting. With a limited color palette, a variety of lines and marks is crucial to an interesting composition. The scale and the vantage points change from page to page, along with the size of the pictures. Sometimes they are as large as a double-page spread. Here the artist layered five scenes horizontally on the same page. As Kitten runs toward the moon in each scene, the background changes. Parallel lines represent the siding of a house, and angled lines suggest the sidewalk. The landscape changes from a garden portrayed by simple lines forming flowers and leaves surrounded by white, to long lines of grasses that fill the section from top to bottom. The moon and Kitten, drawn in the blackest lines, are always the focus.

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