

Get the Picture?

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Picture book experts commonly assert that in the best books one sees a combination of fine art and exemplary writing, which reinforce each other. The finished product that results is stronger because of this interaction of words and images. How is this symbiosis achieved?

To answer that question, we need to consider how picture books come to be. Sometimes, they are the product of one individual who crafts both the words and the images. Two who come to mind are Lois Ehlert, as in *Waiting for Wings* (Harcourt 2001), and Denise Fleming, as in *Pumpkin Eye* (Holt 2001). In such cases, the creator can move back and forth between text and art, adding a detail in the art and removing it from the words, or the reverse.

At other times, a pair of individuals has the luxury of working together, exchanging ideas and shaping the interrelationship between the art and the words. This is often the case in the creation of successful series books such as *The Magic School Bus*. Joanna Cole and Bruce Degen continue their collaboration in *Ms. Frizzle's Adventures: Ancient Egypt* (Scholastic 2001).

In an alternative approach, an editor deliberately keeps an artist and author apart in order to nurture two interrelated interpretations of the same story. As someone who crafts only the words in picture books, I can vouch for the fact that this is a process filled with apprehension. But when the finished book arrives, I usually find, as other authors probably do, that the artist's vision has enriched and expanded my story line in ways I could not have anticipated.

An artist can work in several ways to relate visuals to words and extend ideas found in the text. Sometimes, the art simply encodes, in a different medium, what the author has written. The truly remarkable, highly abstract art of Synthia Saint James can be appreciated for what it is, an exploration of the power of hard-edged shapes and saturated color, which paired together create dramatic patterns. Her art for *Tukama Tootles the Flute: A Tale from the Antilles*, retold by Phillis Gershator (Orchard 1994), followed this style and was not intended to add any significant amount of visual detail to the words by Gershator.

Beyond encoding, artists sometimes enrich the story line through the use of objects. In Cathryn Falwell's *David's Drawings* (Lee & Low 2001), she establishes setting through her art. When we see David and his sister in their kitchen, we see the design of the cupboards, the shape and color of a pair of canisters on the counter, the designs in the wallpaper and the tablecloth, as well as the abstract art hanging on the wall.

None of this is described through words, but we get a clear sense of the environment because of the art. This is a visual particularization of common, and thus easily understood, objects.

Some artists are fond of adding a "visual signature" to their work. It has been duly noted by several critics that viewers can always find Chris Van Allsburg's dog in each of his books, though it isn't mentioned in the text. The same is true for the cats that are a recurring image in books by Trina Schart Hyman.

At other times, the artist elaborates. For example, James Marshall crams his visual interpretation of Edward Lear's *The Owl and the Pussycat* (HarperCollins 1998) with a wealth of detail not included in the poem itself. We learn time (the early 1900s), social class (a maid waves goodbye), mode of travel (not simply a boat, but an ocean liner), costume (those wonderfully elaborate hats), and even the type of marriage ceremony (the turkey, as a bishop, presides). Many of these are allusions, of course, which children won't know, and perhaps don't need to know, to respond to the book. The whimsy of such details delights adults who respond consciously on one level, while children respond on a quite different level.

It is also possible for the artist to *extend* the story. In *The Bear under the Stairs* (Dial 1993), Helen Cooper provides an entire, wordless coda to the story, which shows the main character going off to his next adventure, valise and umbrella in hand, boarding the red propeller airplane in which he will travel. In *I, Crocodile* (HarperCollins 1999), we see that artist Fred Marcellino goes beyond adding images, by adding a sequence of events at the very end of his imaginative tale. The last three images present a group of Parisians, one the elegant lady in pink who slips accidentally into a manhole. On the last spread, we see the contented main character, belly bulging, picking his teeth with a plume from her hat. None of this is encoded in words.

In addition to showing objects and events, artists sometimes choose to indicate motion as it is happening. Usually action is depicted representationally. That is, the artist shows us multiple images to indicate movement. This is often called *continuous narrative*. Margot Zemach showed us the wolf's fury as he leaped from the ground onto the roof and into the chimney in *The Three Little Pigs* (Farrar 1988) by drawing four images to show motion. Another example is in the art Satomi Ichikawa provided for *Tanya and Emily in a Dance for Two* by Patricia Lee Gauch (Philomel 1994); when Tanya "danced a leopard," we see five images of her, spread in an arc across the page, to depict the action.

In contrast, some artists borrow a visual convention from comic book art, and show through the use of drawn motion lines that a character is moving. Michael Rex uses this device to show motion in *My Race Car* (Holt 2000). When the cars are moving, we see trails of smoke to indicate speed. When the drivers shake hands, semicircular lines above and below the hands indicate the action.

Less often we create motion ourselves in the way we manipulate a book. In *Three Science Flip Books* (Little 1982) Ed Emberley does small multipaged books and encourages us to fan over the pages to create the motion of the animals, butterfly, and flower that he depicts.

Sometimes the artist makes subtle nonverbal comments, not noted in the words, which are intended to give viewers some insight into impending events or feelings. In *The Visitors Who Came to Stay* by Annalena McAfee and Anthony Browne (Viking 1985), Katy's teddy bear and Earl, the cat, immediately react to these unwelcome guests, even though the father had just a moment before opened the door. Even the clock on the bookcase shelf is wide-eyed in apprehension over this intrusion. It is only much later that the words in the story document Katy and her father's dismay.

STYLE IN ILLUSTRATIONS

The artistic style an artist uses sets up the viewer's attitude toward the story. At times the representations are resolutely *realistic*, albeit a bit romanticized, as in the exemplary work of Trina Schart Hyman in *The Sleeping Beauty* (Little, Brown, anniversary edition, 2002). Even though the time period is historic, and the geographic location far distant, viewers can immediately understand the art because every detail is so clearly representative. Straw, hair, feathers, facial features are all anchored in their real-world counterparts.

In contrast, we see in *My Car* (Greenwillow 2001) by Byron Barton an interesting example of the types of *abstract* visual images children learn how to process at quite an early age. Neither the car, nor the male narrator, look anything like actual cars and people, but preschool children will have learned, without overt instruction, how to "read" such resolutely simplified symbols. They can recognize the objects the artist shows, like a bus, or a policeman, before they can decode the words. These vividly colored, highly saturated objects with unequivocal edges are characteristic of Barton's work.

There isn't a lovelier example of *impressionism* anywhere in children's book art than found in Maurice Sendak's pictures for *Mr. Rabbit and the Lovely Present* by Charlotte Zolotow (Harper 1962). His juxtaposed dabs of light and bright watercolors effectively capture the fleeting impressions of objects in the tradition of the French impressionist museum artists like Claude Monet.

Kate Spohn's *Broken Umbrellas* (Viking 1994) provides an example of *expressionism*, a style in which the artist is less concerned with the effect of light on objects than with a deeper focus on how the objects make the artist feel. Spohn

evokes a palpable sense of loneliness as she shows us detail-less figures, often only parts of figures, against anonymous backgrounds. It would be interesting to compare Spohn's art with reproductions of museum artist Milton Avery's work, to identify the visual similarities in the two artists' style.

COMPONENTS OF STYLE

Style is made up of various visual components; the ways in which these are put together affect the final look of the art work. Artists' use of *line* varies greatly, depending on intent. Sometimes line is purposely tentative, disconnected, and momentary, as in John Burningham's *Hushabye* (Knopf 2001). In contrast, line can be bold and brash, connected and unwavering, as in David Frampton's art for *My Son John* by Jim Aylesworth (Holt 1994).

Color is another critical part of style. Color may be staunchly realistic, or imaginative and unrelated to colors in the real world. Thomas Locker's oil paintings in *Sky Tree: Seeing Science through Art* (HarperCollins 1995) reflect his interest in rendering as realistically as possible the array of colors found in nature. In contrast, Olga Zharkova's tissue paper art for *We Three Kings* (Scholastic 1993) evokes feelings through the use of color that is not realistic, to focus on the mysterious quality of events being shown. Color can also vary in its intensity. In the art Leo and Diane Dillon created for *Mansa Musa* by Khephra Burns (Harcourt 2001), darkly handsome, saturated colors draw us into this tale from Mali. Conversely, color can be delicately pale, creating a surreal, pastel world, as in Elizabeth Harbour's art for *The Thistle Princess* by Vivian French (Candlewick 1998).

Artists sometimes create three-dimensional, rounded *shapes* that fool the eye into thinking that those objects have weight and substance, a technique known as *trompe l'oeil*. For example, Marilee Heyer's art in *We Goddesses* by Doris Orgel (DKInk 1999) shows the voluptuousness of Athena, Aphrodite, and Hera through the skillful use of shading to create bodies convincingly three-dimensional. Other artists, in contrast, intentionally arrange flat, two-dimensional shapes in ways that emphasize the fact that these are not objects one could walk around and behind. For example, Gerald McDermott's art for *Jabuti: The Tortoise: A Trickster Tale from the Amazon* (Harcourt 2001) demonstrates his ongoing interest in arranging flat shapes on the page in interesting juxtapositions, with no effort to create rounded dimensionality for these shapes.

Artists, like Korky Paul, at times exaggerate *proportions*, making noses or cheeks more bulbous and tails unrealistically long, as shown in his art for *Aesop's Funky Fables* by Vivian French (Viking 1997). This approach can result in very humorous art. Alternatively, artists sometimes choose to make all of the proportions in their art accurately reflect those in the real world. In *The Hired Hand* by Robert D. San Souci (Dial 1997), Jerry Pinkney crafts people, animals, buildings, and objects that are in perfect proportion to one another.

Artists also manipulate *space*. Some are not concerned with creating deep space, giving the illusion that one could “walk into the picture.” Rather, they explore arranging people and objects close to the front of the flat picture plane. An example is the art by Michelle Rieko Kumata in *Flowers from Mariko* by Rick Noguchi and Deneen Jenks (Lee & Low 2001). Other artists, like Christopher Denise, create the illusion of deep space by placing objects behind each other. When looking at one of his illustrations in *A Redwall Winter’s Tale* by Brian Jacques (Philomel 2001), our eyes first focus on the small animals on the floor nearest the viewer, are drawn next to the animals seated at the closest table, then move to Father Abbot behind that, continue on past a second, more distant table to an arched dividing wall behind that, finally resting on an exterior landscape beyond.

DESIGNING THE PAGE

In addition to the style in the art itself, artists manipulate elements of page layout. Frames and borders are visual features that set up the viewer’s particular relationship with the story. For instance, in Kris Waldherr’s *Sacred Animals* (HarperCollins 2001), the central piece of art on the jacket is elaborately framed, foretelling the elaborate gold tone foliate borders found inside. This framing on the book cover and small monochrome cartouches, or decorative panels, at the bottom of the frames within, which reiterate the animal being featured in the full-color art above, reinforce that observers are outside of the experience looking in.

In contrast, we cannot avoid being pulled into the exuberant pictures by Joe Cepeda for Pam Munoz Ryan’s *Mice and Beans* (Scholastic 2001). The immediacy of the art and the close visual distance the artist employs in his double spreads, bled to the page edge, compel us into this energetic look at one aspect of Mexican culture. The art and story simply would not have worked within frames.

OTHER DESIGN DECISIONS

To this point, we have considered the art itself and its placement on the page. But there are other aspects of the book as a physical object. Art directors must make decisions about such elements as paper, binding, type, size, and axis orientation. These decisions may be made on the basis of assumptions about children, as when we think a small book fits comfortably into young hands, or conversely, that preschool children need big books to grasp. *The Tortoise and the Hare and Other Favorite Fables* by Graham Percy (Holt 1993) creates an entirely different effect with its 3½ × 4¼" size than does Jean de Brunhoff’s *The Story of Babar, the Little Elephant* (Random 1984) with its imposing 10¼ × 14" format. Adult viewers sense something, intuitively, when approaching two such different story “containers,” though this is not something children necessarily process consciously.

Axis orientation is also a significant design element. A horizontal rectangle, as used by James Rumford in *Traveling Man* (Houghton 2001), gives the author-artist a full 22 inches across which to stretch the ribbon of road he uses to illustrate the wandering journey of Ibn Battuta, born in Tangier, who made a 75,000-mile journey through the Middle East from 1325 to 1354.

In contrast, the 11¼" vertical rectangle used by David Shannon for his art in *The Shark God* by Rafe Martin (Scholastic 2001) is just right for the three-part division of the openings. Here, a full page of art, stretched from top to bottom, faces across the gutter to a bordered vertical column of text beside a thin vertical piece of art.

Sometimes artists force the reader to manipulate the book position to change orientation. Gail Haley, in her masterful *Jack and the Bean Tree* (Crown 1986), makes use of horizontal spreads across the gutters, until the twentieth opening, when the reader has to switch the book’s position to vertical in order to fully respond to the dramatic, wordless spread of the giant pursuing Jack down the bean stalk.

VISUAL ANTICIPATION

Sometimes picture book artists aim to meet readers’ expectations. When we see Tomie dePaola’s name on a book spine, we can bring to mind a stored visual image of the kind of art to expect. His art for *Bill and Pete to the Rescue* (Putnam 1998) comes to us as a familiar visual friend, because the images continue a style with which we are very familiar. In contrast, who—knowing Marcia Brown’s *Cinderella, or the Little Glass Slipper* (Scribner 1954)—could have anticipated the intense, abstract collages and silhouettes she produced for *Shadow* (Scribner 1982)? The gauzy watercolor and chalk art in the former book might seem to have been done by a different artist than the one who did the sharply angular art in the latter book.

Artists also can challenge our expectations, not of their personal style, but rather general expectations of genres. Seeing the title *Animals in Flight* (Houghton 2001), one might assume that an information book, filled with facts about various creatures that can fly, would be illustrated with full-color photographs. Such is the usual visual expectation we bring to factual books. However, Steve Jenkins and Robin Page upset our expectations, causing us to look with great care at their intricately detailed paper collage art for this book.

LINKING MUSEUM AND BOOK ART

Recently there have been an increasing number of books that include pieces of fine art, allowing children living in even the remotest areas to get a sense of the paintings in museums. *A Child’s Book of Play in Art* by Lucy Micklethwait (DK Publishing 1996) is a particularly effective example. It is oversized (10¼ × 13¾"), allowing the author to present as many as five

images on an opening without crowding. Arranged in categories to appeal to children, like “Make the Faces” and “Animal Noises,” the paintings range from a Greek amphora (c. 490 BC) to a 1992 American painting by Roy Lichtenstein. Children experiencing books like this get an informal introduction to a wide array of art styles from many different cultures.

Other books use museum art for other purposes. In *I Dreamed I Was a Ballerina* by Anna Pavlova (Metropolitan Museum of Art/Atheneum 2001), full-page, full-color reproductions of original art by Edgar Degas accompany the brief autobiography of the famed dancer. The biography *Meet Matisse* by Nelly Munthe (Little, Brown 1983) includes reproductions of his work, as well as full-color examples created by the author, showing the principles embodied in Matisse’s work.

LEARNING TO LOOK

Looking at any book in relation to another related book makes the viewing experience more significant. When comparing Eric Carle’s art for the first edition of *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* by Bill Martin Jr. (Holt 1967) to that of the 1992 edition of the same title, differences in shape, color tonalities, and directionality of the animals are

readily apparent. The two book covers differ in color, size, and placement of the typefaces. Recently, six-year-olds with whom I worked commented on the different sequence of color stripes on the endpapers, and the presence of the tiny bird there in the first edition, not included in the second one.

When comparing and contrasting two editions of *The Sleeping Beauty* (Little, Brown 1977 and 2002), differences are seen in the jacket art, including new fonts, and endpapers. Inside, the art is the same, but reproduced in the new edition on a higher gloss paper, with crisper details and significantly richer color. A similar comparison can be made with two editions of Marianna Mayer’s *Beauty and the Beast* (Four Winds 1978; SeaStar 2000). The art by Mercer Mayer is showcased more effectively on the glazed jacket of the latter edition, and in the interior the colors are enhanced by the higher gloss paper. Different typefaces in the two can also be contrasted.

The ways in which art and words in picture books interact, each enriching the other, are various. Before sharing picture books with young children, adults first need to study these interrelationships themselves, in order to help children become more aware of and responsive to the richness and creativity exemplified in contemporary American picture books. With our help, children can learn that this format is much more than simply a container for a story.

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