

Midcentury Illustrations

Playing with Shape and Color

Critical Seminar Spring 2014

Catherine Ho

Overview

There was a sense of wonder and naivety that started showing up in Illustrations during the 1950s. Figures and objects suddenly became more geometric, less realistic, and curiously composed. The simplicity, directness, and vibrant approach were appreciated by many. There would be no sense of pretense since the style was entirely imaginary and curiously explorative and it seemed that people appreciated this aspect. Whilst the illustrations before were quite realistically rendered and controlled, this loose yet colorfully bold approach brought a sense of ease. In this exhibition you will find this sudden design oriented style permeating through different platforms of the midcentury, such as in print, packaging, and even in illustration today!

The color and shapes used really show the playfulness of the time, especially the luxury that the rising economy and society were starting to enjoy. The bounty of work available in illustration really allowed for a wide range for styles to start blooming. Since televisions were not publicly available, these colorful illustrations were great communicators and very attractive to look at and enjoy.

The colors and the utilization of shapes helped this style permeate through many different markets. Not only was it extremely successful in the children's book market but the vivid illustrations also created excellent advertisement and packaging. With the middle class on the rise, consumerism was booming, and this was a great incentive for companies to create alluring posters. This style created fun and whimsical posters that attracted people to what they were marketing.

Even now, this great shape-oriented and boldly colored way of creating has survived to the modern age of illustration. Some artworks done today are even hard to distinguish from those of the past, but are nevertheless just as attractive.

Books

Many influential illustrators rose to fame at this time for their simple and bold style. A large amount of Disney artists were recruited by the Golden books in an attempt at creating higher quality children's books to be introduced to the mass market. Outside of the Golden Books, many illustrators also wrote and drew on their own. Those turned out just as, if not more, successful. There were revolutionary concepts evolving inside these books that seem even too mature for kids today. Such as the theme of The Marvelous Merry-Go-Around written by Jane Werner and illustrated by J.P. Miller. In a world where adults don't always know what is best and that there should be risk taken on behalf of the children for pure entertainment, this book is quite far reaching. However, the color conveys a sense of wonder that is very emotionally appealing and visually stimulating. The bright pink and blues are used to hide the real skin of animals, making them look like toys so that the parents felt that it was safer for the children to ride them. This strange concealment could be interpreted many ways by both adults and children.

The designs of these books were also quite successful at hiding layers of meaning and also raising questions for the children. It stirs their curiosity and drives them to think for themselves. These books were filled with wonder, possibilities, and what ifs that children didn't want to ask their parents to answer. They wanted to figure out why on their own. And isn't that the true purpose of these books?

Charley Harper

Snowy Egret 1974

Cover for "Charles Harper's Birds and Words" by
Charley Harper

Book, 1974

Mixed Media

Private Collection

Charley Harper did not always enjoy drawing birds. However, after discovering what a feeding station was, he got one and became heavily inspired. Interestingly enough, Harper admits to not being a very avid bird watcher and heavily relies on bird guides to help in his paintings. In most of his work relating to birds, Harper would often observe others' interpretations first, include some bird watching if possible, and then systematically design his paintings. First, Charles Harper would sketch out his idea and then cut out a bunch of bird-shaped pieces. He would lay them out and form different test compositions. When Harper is satisfied, he uses rubber cement and pastes the pieces down to form the base for his painting. In this painting, Harper has simplified the bird. In its simplest form of triangles and circles, the figure is very prominent against its warm background, with delicate details emphasizing the bird's soft feathers and natural surroundings.



Alice and Martin Provensen

Illustration for "The Funny Bunny", pages 19-20
Book, Simon and Schuster, 1950

Mixed Media

Collection of Simon and Schuster

"The Funny Bunny" explains the phenomenon of how all bunnies got their tails. In this instance, we follow the main character through a series of delicately painted forest sceneries as he combs the area for a perfect tail substitute. Through the journey, we meet fellow inhabitants of the forest, such as these birds here, with their beautiful plumage of tail feathers and playful crowing which seems to urge the bunny on in its search.

Alice and Martin Provensen entered the literary market through the midcentury Golden Book. Ever since they met, their illustrations have been the product of a harmonious and inspiring collaboration. Their work melded together so perfectly that people were unable to tell who did what, the Provensens took this as a great compliment! Their similar taste in color, shape, and line work was very beneficial to their goal of being able to finish and be inspired by each other's work.



Gyo Fujikawa

Illustrations for "Oh, What a Busy Day!"

Book, Sterling Publisher, 1976

Mixed Media

Collection of Sterling Publisher

Gyo Fujikawa worked as a promotions artist for Disney before she moved to New York and began work in advertising for William Douglas McAdams. Fujikawa caught the attention of Debra Dorfman, of Grosset & Dunlap, and was commissioned to illustrate "A Child's Garden of Verses" by Rober Louis Stevenson.

Her illustrations were the first to depict multi-racial children which would be lasting theme in her body of work. In comparison to most of her contemporaries, particularly her Disney peers, Fujikawa's illustrations of animals and children are more realistic. There is a beautiful softness and playfulness in the details especially in the movement of her characters. The colors and her line work compliments each other harmoniously and creates beautifully intimate environments.



Gyo Fujikawa

Illustrations for "Oh, What a Busy Day!"

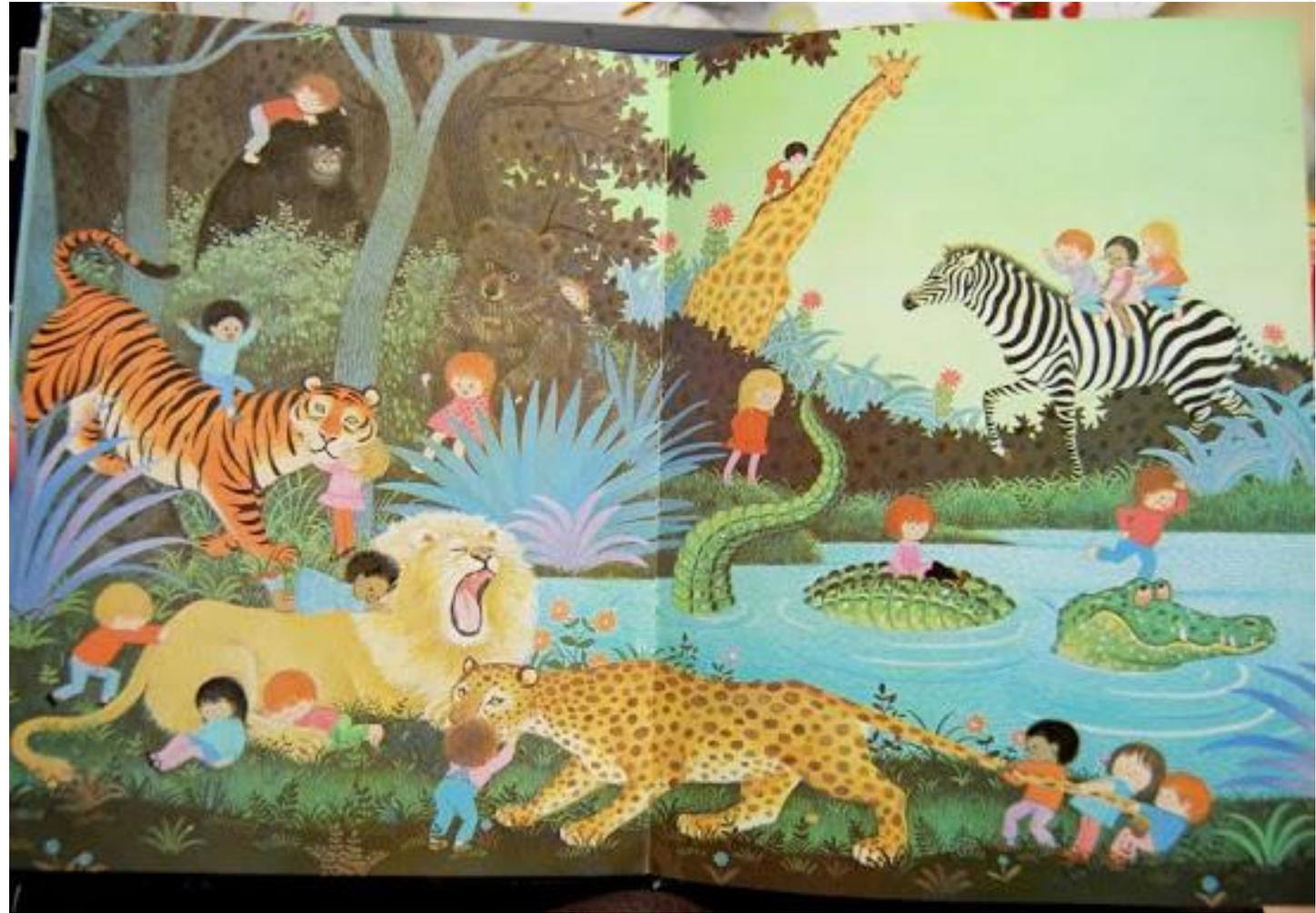
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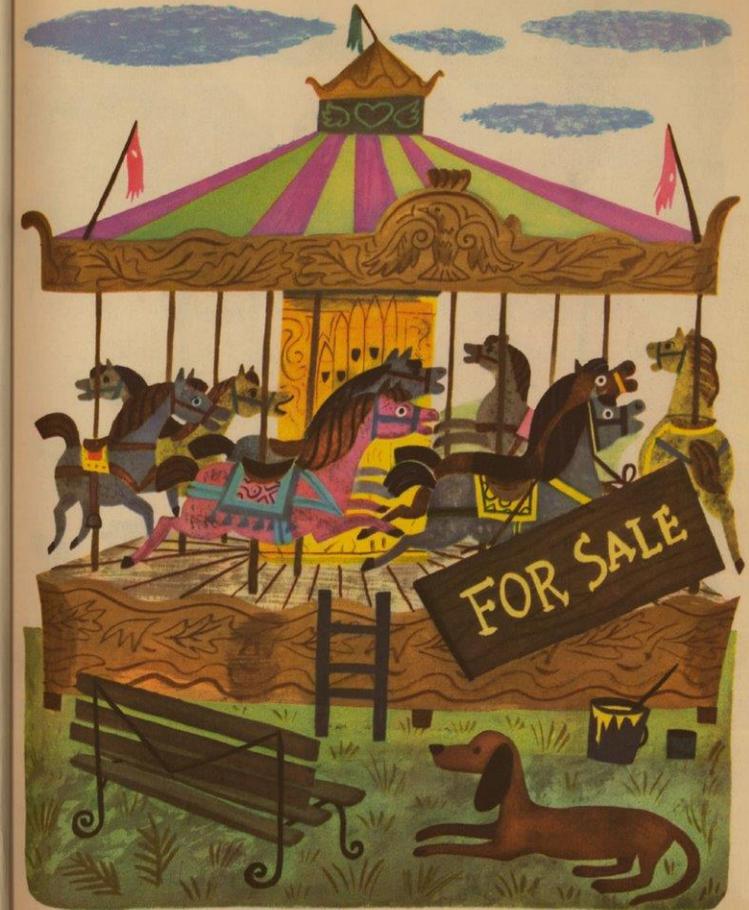
J.P. Miller

Illustrations for "The Marvelous Merry-Go-Round" written by Jane Werner (c.1950),
pgs. 8-9, 22-23, 34-35
Book, Little Golden books / Random House, (c.1950)
Mixed Media
Collection of Random House

J.P. Miller started working in Joe Grant's Character Department where he created characters and environments for Pinocchio, Fantasia, and Dumbo. He was friends with Mary Blair, Martin Provensen, and Richard Scarry. After he left Disney for military service during WWII, Golden Books recruited him to revive children's books for the mass market. One of his most famous contributions was the "Little Red Hen".

In "The Marvelous Merry-Go-Round", Miller use more realistic colors than what he usually chooses. The visual cues he uses to help the narrative progress in the book is universally understood because of his use of color. By applying realistic colors to convey the ordinary, he enhances and really pushes the believability of the story upon the reader. As the main character transports the live animals in wildly colored train carts, the world starts to shift into a sense of wonder. Then they are painted bright pastel colors to disguise them from the adults, so that it seems that only children can handle the truth in the end.

But not Tommy Alan. The very morning Tommy was grown up, he went out and bought a merry-go-round. Yes, sir, a merry-go-round with a musical middle machine and a beautiful canopy over the top that was patterned in purple and green.

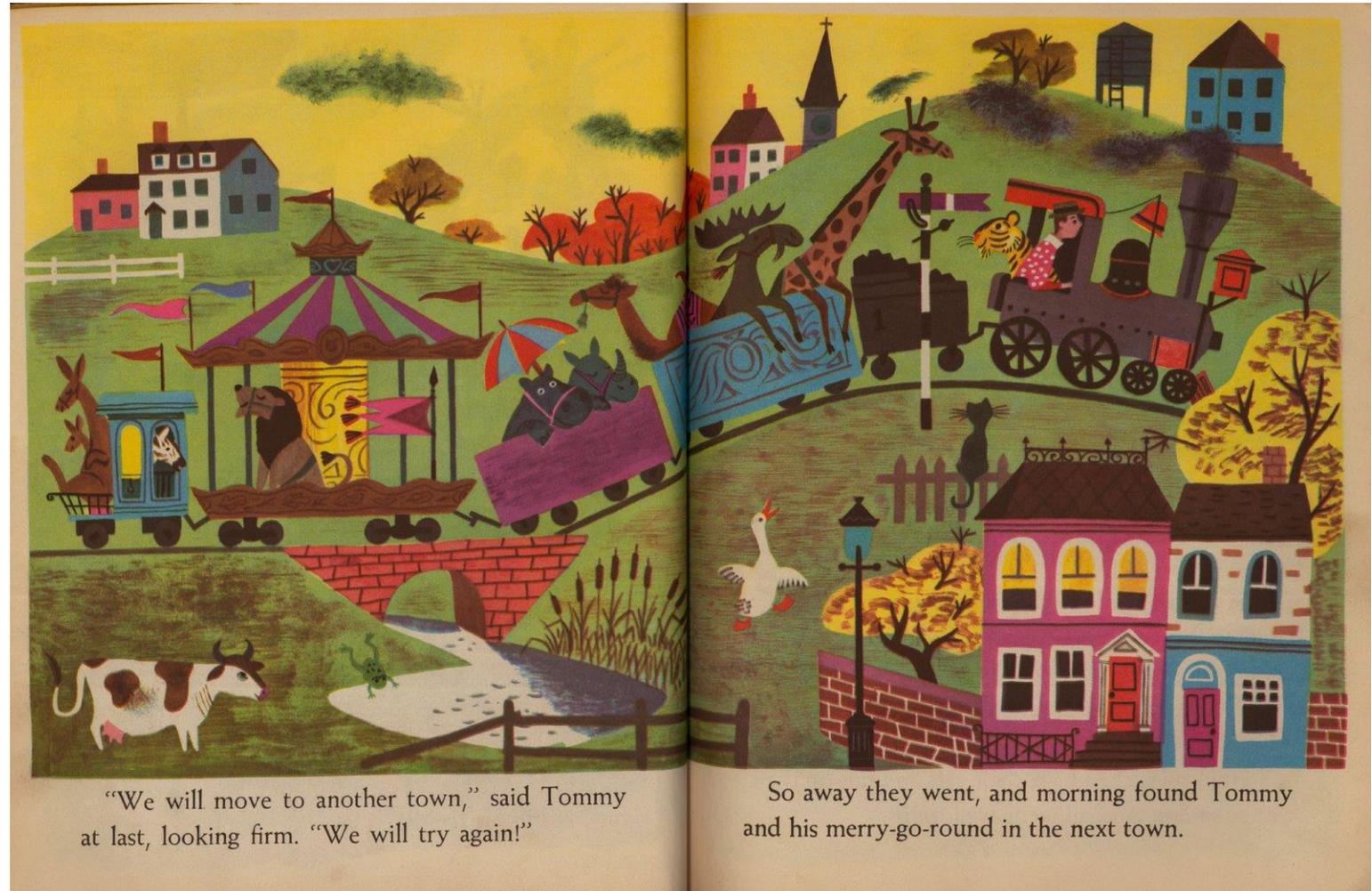


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"We will move to another town," said Tommy at last, looking firm. "We will try again!"

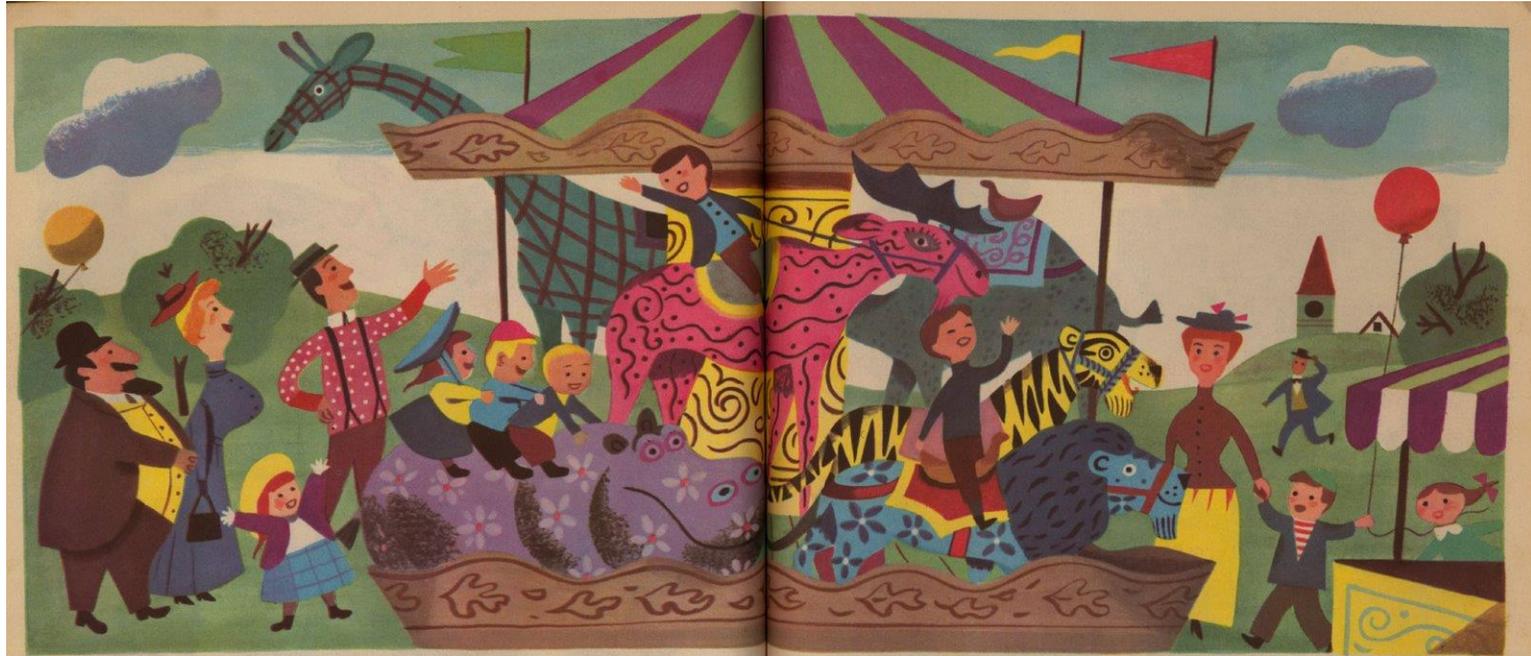
So away they went, and morning found Tommy and his merry-go-round in the next town.

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"What a charming merry-go-round," said all the grownups, as they lifted their smallest children onto the hippopotamus's lovely wide back. "What interesting wooden animals. How very unusual," they said. "Isn't it quaint?"

The animals all stood like chunks of wood. But the children understood at once.

"They're alive!" they whispered under cover of the tinkling tunes from Tommy Alan's music machine. "How wonderful!"

And they fondly patted the animals' heads, and spoke to them as they rode. The animals flickered their ears ever so softly, to show that they had heard, and they smiled with their big, round eyes.

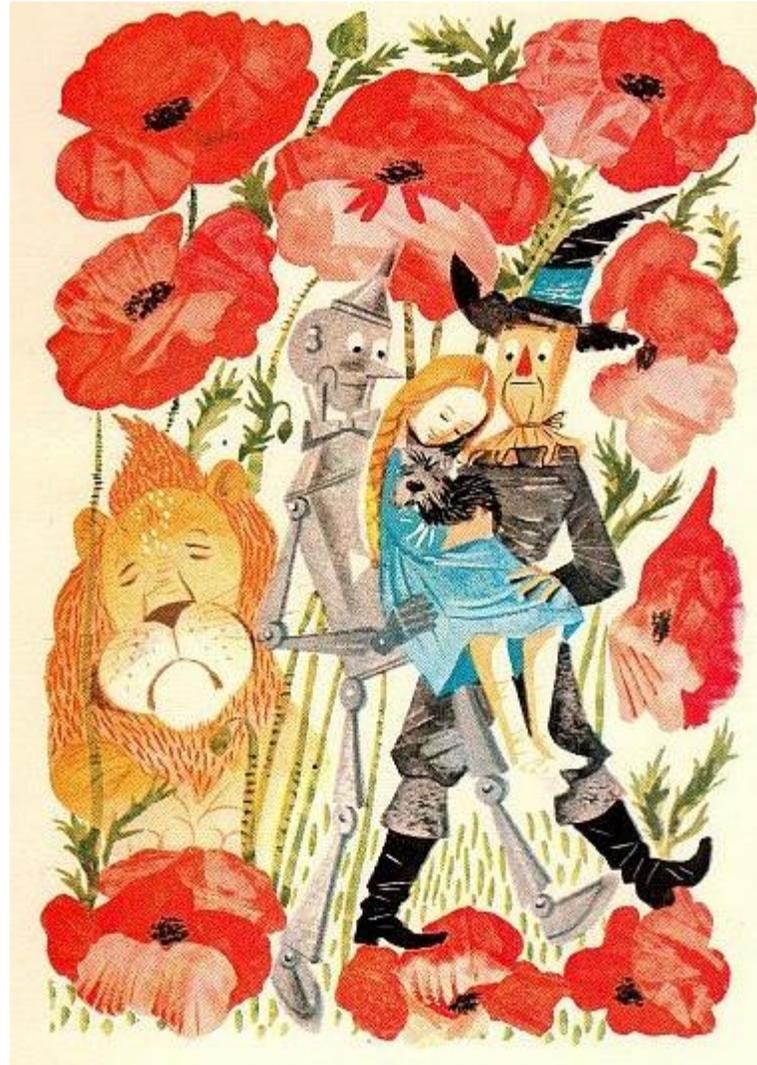
Leonard Weisgard

Title page for "The New Wizard of Oz", 1955
Mixed Media

Northeast Children's Literature Collection

Leonard Weisgard spent most of his childhood in England. When he came back to America at the age of 8, he was unhappy with the monotone New York Schoolbooks. In this instant, he decided that he would not be limited by one color. While he studied art in college, he was greatly influenced by cave paintings, Gothic and Renaissance art, and avant-garde French children's book illustrations. He would use a variety of mediums in his books. In the beginning of his career, he worked as an editorial illustrator for magazines such as *Good Housekeeping*, *The New Yorker*, and *Harper's Bazaar*. Weisgard wrote and illustrated children's books as well as illustrating for others. Eventually, he became heavily involved in children's education and worked closely with the American Library Association.

Weisgard's style is quite organic and fluid. This palette is as vibrant as those of his peers of the decade and he seemed to give even more personality to his characters, who were not human. Perhaps he was obsessed with the idea of making children recognize each other instantaneously while everything else is filled with infinite wonder. This way, young readers could identify with the main character and immerse themselves quickly into the story.



Posters and Ads

With this innovative use of drawing and color, there was a great attraction in using it for marketing. In a true test of appeal, as long as the work attracts the attention of children, it is certain to pull along their parents. And why not? With appealing shapes and very selective and intentional line work, these illustrations were very orderly and beautifully designed in a world that was just recovering from chaos. Things were being rationed and countries were financially unstable but these illustrations offered so much possibilities.

It made sense that these welcoming, bright, and warm illustrations were happily accepted and that people were thirsty for more. In fact, this graphic style could be seen appearing all over the world. Such as Jack Welch's illustrations of his wife as a young girl inspiring the creation of Peko-chan, the most widely recognized illustrated character in Japan.

Jean Colin

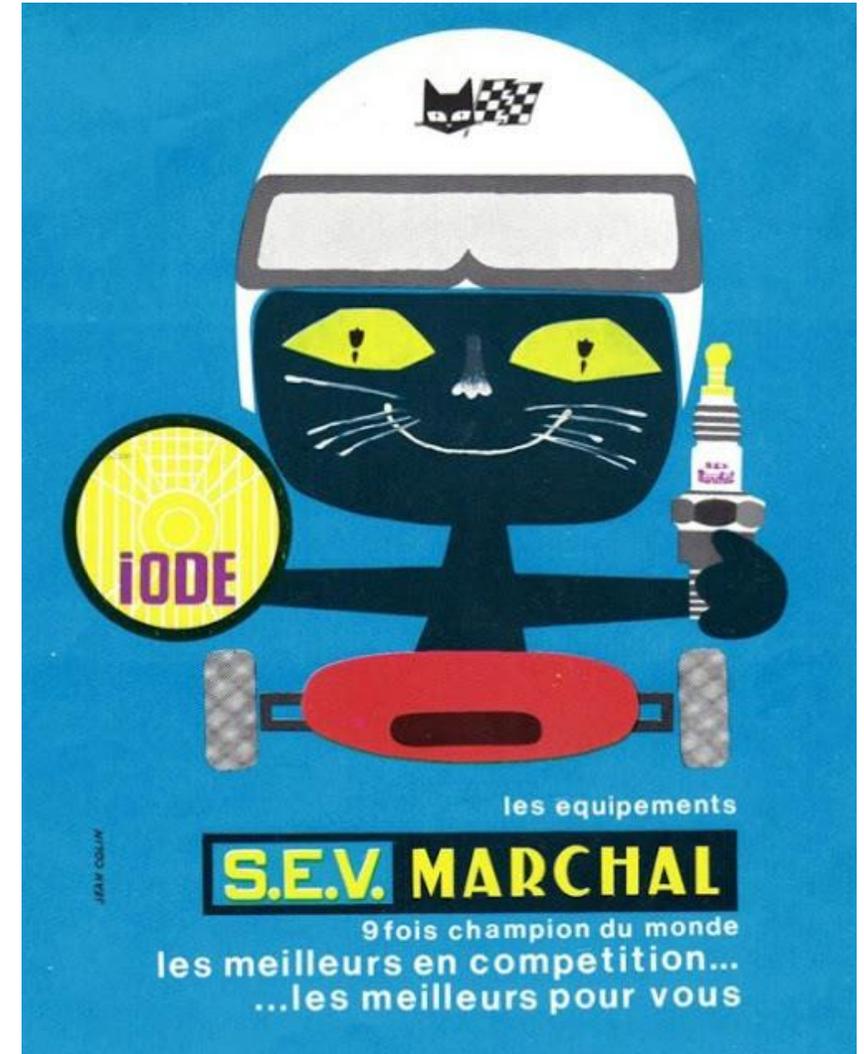
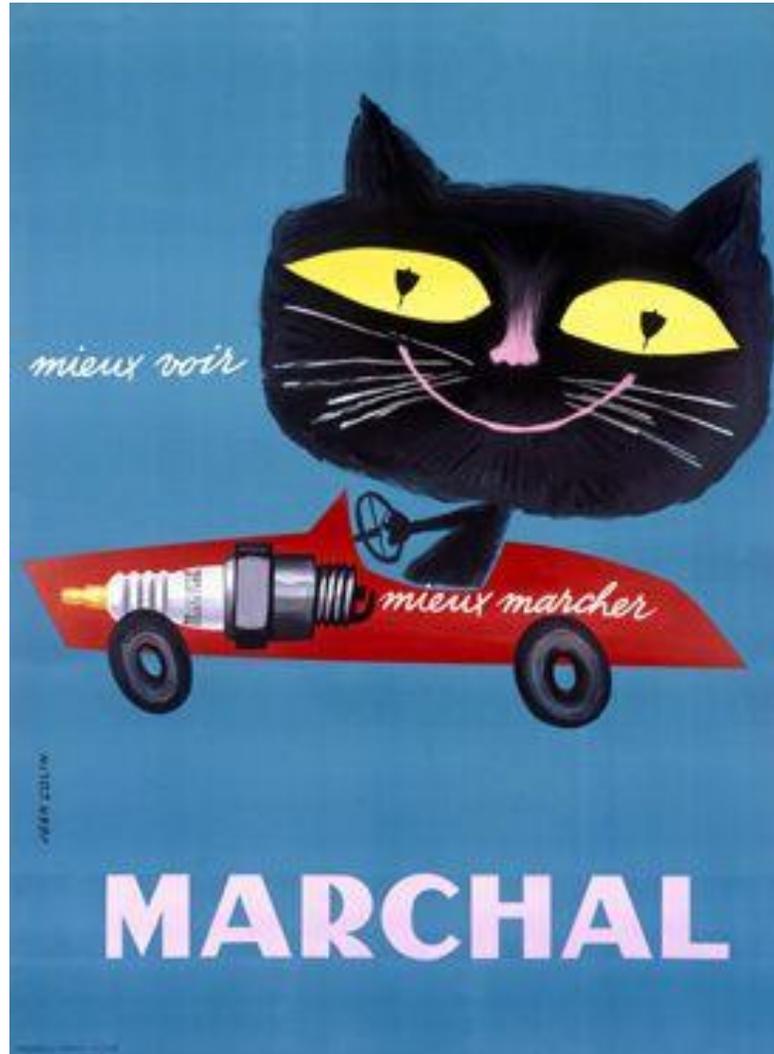
"See More, Work Better" Marchal advertisement poster for spark plugs

"London.. 9 times world champions – the best in the competition.. the best for you" iodine advertisement?
Advertising campaign for auto equipment company Marchal, 1950

Private Collection

Jean Colin graduated from Beaux-Arts in 1933. When France was occupied, he created social propaganda posters and later turned them into movie posters. He quickly overtook one of France's most prominent poster designers, Paul Colin, and had a very successful advertising career creating posters for Cinzano, Kiwi shoe polish, Philips razors, Air France, the SNCF, and auto equipment company Marchal.

One of his great contributions was designing this cat mascot for Marchal. Marchal was well known for their headlights and, in their advertisements prior, had an actual headlight as their mascot. In these posters, the cat has replaced the lamp head. Now with the lamp's light shining through its eyes, it happily steers its car. The cat's pupil has the company's shield logo dead center with a line running down the middle, a feature that has been a constant design in Marchal's products. With this colorful and happy image and a country recovering from foreign occupation and damage, people were drawn and attracted to this character's happiness. Some customers have even stated that they bought lamps from this company just because of the cat logo.



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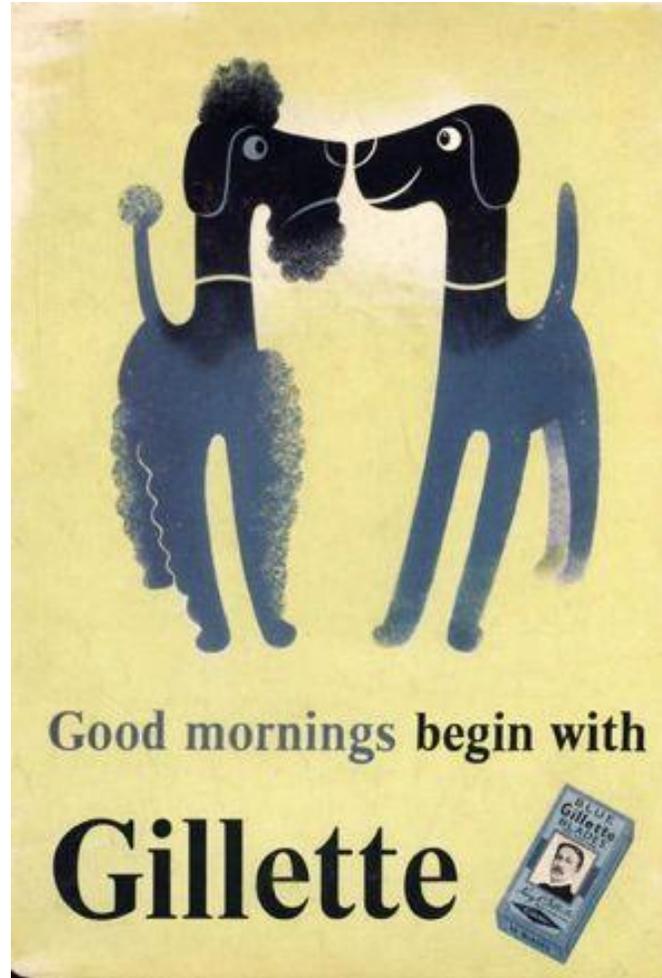


Tom Eckersley

Advertising posters for Gillette, early 1950s
Mixed Media

Tom Eckersley began art school at 16. Here, he met Erick Lombers and together they formed a partnership of freelance poster design. Eckersley was strongly influenced by early thirties artwork because posters, at the time, were the best mainstream form of publicity. It was at this time he also became influenced by avant-garde posters from England and France. Clients and agencies at this time were looking for both function and aesthetics and soon Eckersley and Lombers became heavily involved in poster design. When the war broke out, Eckersley created a set of posters for the *Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents*, illustrating potentially hazardous moments in the work place.

Although commercial advertising was restricted and the country was under financial strain, Tom Eckersley was able to take on new clients such as Gillette after the war. During the war, many of his posters were dark and foreboding with the image having significance over the text. Here, Eckersley brings the same aesthetics over except he has transformed the image into adorable creatures with his light and playful humor. The graphic itself still has prominence over the text but the smooth shapes of the animals make them very inviting and visually engaging to the consumer.

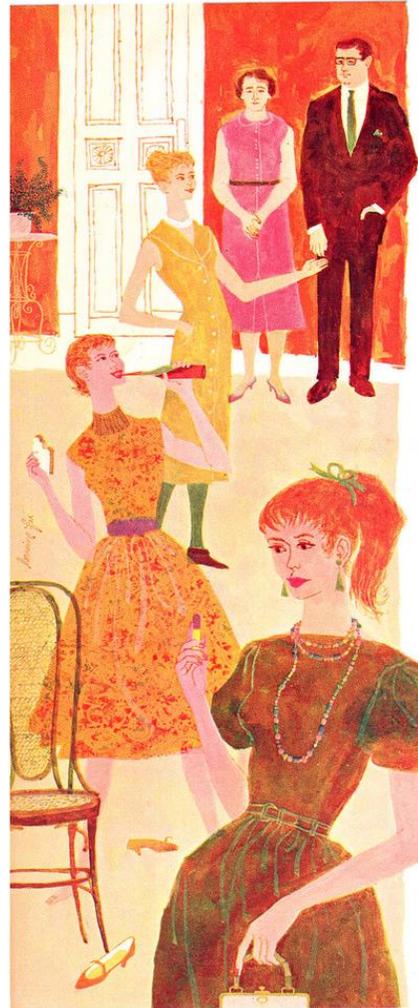


Lorraine Fox

Illustration from *Woman's Day Magazine*, October 1956
Mixed Media

Lorraine Fox was an American illustrator who worked at the Charles E. Cooper studio alongside a group of famous male illustrators such as Al Parker, Coby Whitmore, Jon Whitcomb, and Joseph Bowler. In a world where the idea of beauty was controlled by men, she was able to make publishers recognize her own voice in illustration and managed to gain success against the trend of realism. Her style drew itself from folk art and did not rely on traditional academic renderings such as those of Parker or Rockwell.

This piece from *Woman's Day Magazine*, is quite different. There are many similarities as well. Such as large shapes to construct the composition of space and careful rendering in specific areas to emphasize details. It is reminiscent to Gyo Fujikawa's work though not as tightly controlled but has an added sense of maturity not only because of the grown subject but through her depiction of the human figure. Also by not posing the figures in fluid motion or rounded shapes, the realistic heaviness she is able to convey through the clothes of the two figures in the back really solidifies the ground plane and adds a seriousness that cannot be waved away by the flighty girls standing mid ground.



OCTOBER, 1956

HOW TO BE A GIRL
BY SUSAN BENNETT HOLMES

Whose Friends Are Whose?

YOU'D think a person could be trusted to pick her own friends! After all, who is better suited to decide which people you're bound to have fun with? The answer is obvious to everyone but your parents. When you hear your mother and father on the subject of your pals, it's to creep! The things they criticize you never even noticed. The sensational distinctions that appeal to you don't penetrate to them. You pick your friends for a myriad of sound reasons: gaiety, warmth, a tendency to recklessness, popularity in the class, sympathy, sophistication which you hope will come off on you, a mastery over the opposite sex which you also hope will come off! But your parents require the darndest things. They note the most amazing lacks!

Attached to your family, to every family, is a circle of close friends whom you've known ever since you can remember. There are the two or three kids who feel free to run into your house after school for cookies and milk when no one is home in theirs. There is the family with whom you've been summarily and happily deposited at times of crisis—when your grandmother was so sick and your parents took off like jets for a hospital five hundred miles away. These people are never the subjects of disagreement. They hold places already earned. It is when you bring home a new, glamorous girl for the afternoon, or when another spends her first weekend with you, that parental opinion erupts.

[Continued on page 20]

Parents pick amazing things to criticize in your friends, things you never even noticed

WOMAN'S DAY

Jack Welch

"When I'm eating Jell-O, I wish I were a polar bear..."

Jell-O Ad (c. 1954)

Gouache

Private Collection

Birdseye Kids, 1951

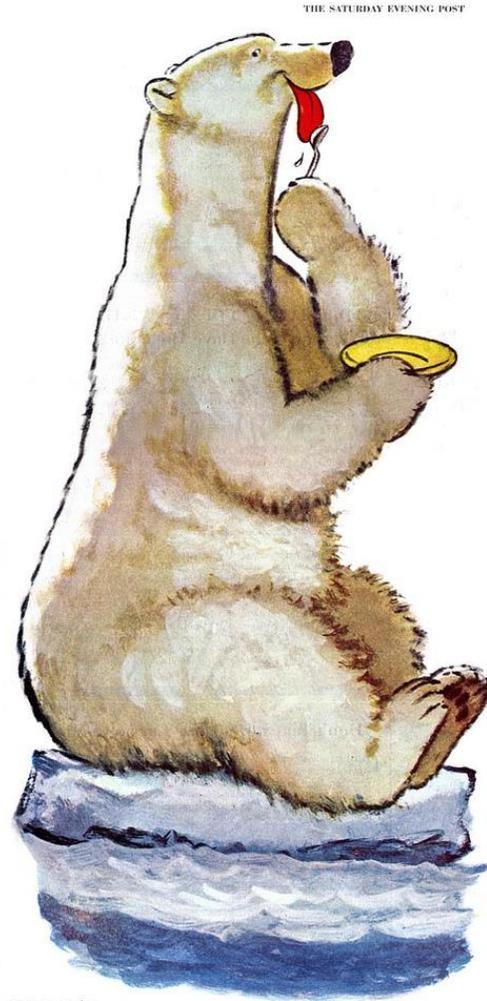
General Foods Corp.

Pekochan

Mascot of Fujiya Food Service Co., Ltd

Jack Welch was from Texas and the smallest of 5 children. When he was in highschool he illustrated for the yearbook and wanted to go to an art college. His parents were dissuaded from sending him to one, but eventually he snuck away to Chicago and started his career as a political cartoonist as well as having his own comic strip. Eventually he went to New York with his wife, Ida Pilling, and started creating advertising illustrations for companies such as Carnation Milk, Keds, Jell-O, etc.

His work always had a nostalgic childlike quality. Perhaps it was because he was illustrating a few decades before it became the midcentury and the graphic style became popular. But the adorable aspects of his illustrations, especially of his animals and children, did not go unnoticed. Illustrations of his original characters the *Birdseye Kids* eventually reached audiences around the world. In the end, the childlike illustration of his wife and a young girl inspired the creation of Pekochan, the most popular illustrated character in Japan. Pekochan is a very graphic character full of personality and readily accepted by those with a sweet tooth. She is the mascot for the Fujiya Food Service Co., Ltd., a nationwide chain of confectionery stores and restaurants in Japan.



When I'm eating
Jell-O, I wish I
were a polar bear

Man, what a
cool dessert!

Now's the
time for



JELL-O IS A REGISTERED TRADEMARK OF GENERAL FOODS CORPORATION



Present Inspired by the Past

In the world today, these colors and shapes have continued to reappear and has now even become an “innovative” approach. With its lasting popularity, we should wonder why it is considered as innovative now as it was half a century ago. The purposeful abstraction and simplification occurring within this decade stimulates the naturally inquisitive mind. The chosen colors are very visually attractive and, even though it is not realistic, the constant exposure and quick acceptance of this style lets people comprehend it quite easily. Through the many generations exposed to this colorful, strong shape-oriented style their first experience with it has always developed into a lasting impression that has been passed down through generations through books, magazines, movies, etc.

The angular graphic shapes and bold colors continue to convey great emotions of characters from children books with the playfulness of the drawings enjoyed by both children and their parents. Even now, adults continue to appreciate the poetic qualities of narrative within these storie, this colorful graphic style and cartooning portrays a way of life provided by these products that people want to obtain. The personality of these drawings are so powerful that it has lasted the test of time.

Herb Lester Associates

Collection of Maps (Berlin), 2011

Digital

Private Collection

Herb Lester Associates was founded by Ben Olins and Jane Smillie. They are inspired by writings from the 1960s and created their company to provide a cultural experience to the curious traveler. Lines and Smillie work together to create travel guides, and are currently expanding as fast as possible; focused on helping a traveler with a particular interest find the most wholesome experience they are currently looking for in the largest cities of Europe and North America. They have guides such as "An Uncle's Guide to London" or "A London Pub For All Reasons", filled with specific tastes and geared towards individuals, it is essentially curated.

The designers at Herb Lester Associates know what consumer they are catering towards. The "knowledge seeking, inquisitive, worldly" travel fanatic who loves the exploring the culture of a different country and what better method to start with especially with this beautifully crafted and carefully designed vintage looking travel guide filled to the brim with highlights of the country you are heading towards. People travelling on vacation are usually looking for something new or exciting, but still relaxing. These guides are a great way to prepare the traveler for what is to come, so that they don't feel lost, in fact, it may provide a comfort for an anxious planner.



Golden Cosmos (Doris Freigofas and Daniel Dolz)

"High Times"

Book, Nobrow Press, 2012

Digital

Artist's Collection

Doris Freigofas and Daniel Dolz are a collaborative illustrator and designer duo. They bounce ideas off of each other once they start on a prompt. Often times they work together on projects, even on a single image, and have slowly adapted with being able to work as one unit. They are from Berlin but have recently moved to Sweden and enjoy sitting outside in the wilderness. They also enjoy sharing a studio that houses multiple artists and houses various machineries, computers, workshops, and soon a printmaking workplace in the cellar. They also grow their own vegetables in the the backyard.

The duo has said they are getting better at being able to work together and perhaps that has created a process that allows them to fit with each other on the page. It does not seem like there are distinctive differences in their styles and their art is spaced very nicely with room for the reader to explore the different aircrafts across the page. It is interesting to see these different shades of the same vintage colors. Now the most eye catching color might be the vibrant deepness of the cerulean blue or the burning red. It is not as yellowy warm as the midcentury illustrations. But then again, most of the modern illustrations seem to have taken a turn for much darker and deeper cool tones.



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Jon Klassen

"I Want My Hat Back" pgs. 25-27

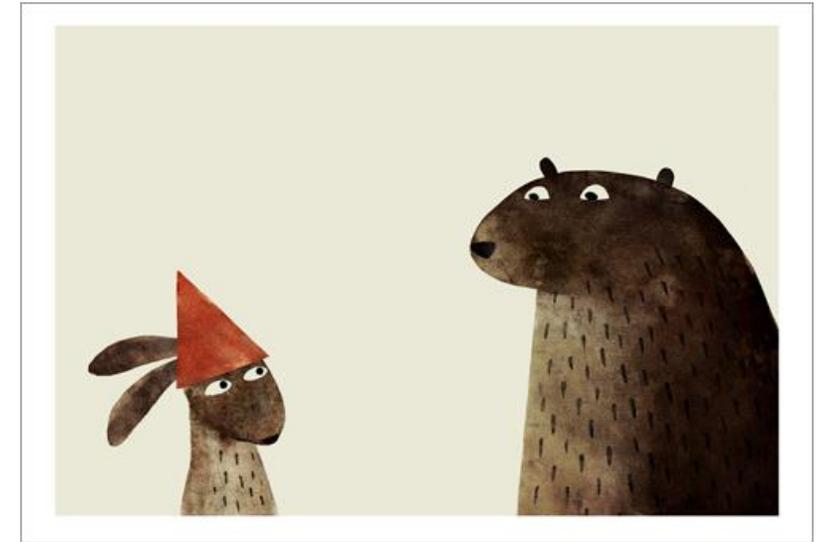
Book, Candlewick Press, 2011

Mixed Media

Artist's Collection

Jon Klassen is a Canadian writer and illustrator. He recently won the 2013 Caldecott Medal for illustration in "This I Not My Hat". He studied animation at Sheridan College and graduated in 2005, eventually moving to Los Angeles. He continues to work with animation as he continues down the path of children's storybooks. In his work, he creates textures, photographs textures, and collages them all digitally as well as editing them.

This book is beautifully crafted. A lot of the textures remind me of how the midcentury illustrators used to paint and create their own textures with brush. Klassen's book is much more clean however because it seems to be more design orientated. The colors are warm and modernized, it seems that he expanded to an extreme range in value so that there is a strong distinction and a soothing silence between shapes in his pages. The way he uses spontaneity in his paint and extreme control with his shapes is fascinating. It strikes a great balance that is natural and composed.



Ping Zhu

"Having a lot to Sort Through"

Magazine, Plansponsor, 2013

Gouache

Artist's Collection

Ping Zhu is an illustrator currently living and working in Brooklyn, New York. She graduated with honors from Art Center College of Design in April 2010. Zhu has worked with the New York Times, New Yorker, GOOD Magazine, Pushkin Press, and Nobrow Press. She works as an editorial illustrator and goes through a process of having initial sketches, then enlarging the selected one to the appropriate size and traditionally brush inking or painting it with dry brush. Her work has a lot of scratchy dry textures and goes well with the movement, volume, and shapes of her subjects.

This piece selected seems to be a particularly fleshy one. Usually Ping Zhu likes to utilize the white space as part of the composition but since this assignment required a full page spread it was necessary to utilize the whole page given. Her colors here are very reminiscent of the primaries in midcentury illustrations. With a pasty coral, warm greens, and light blues. Zhu incorporates more fluidity in her piece and has an architectural construction as well as surrealistic wavy stairs. It is a wonder how she makes it all seem so effortless but that is an effort in and of itself.

