



**The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art:
Celebrating the Art of the Picture Book**

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Abstract: While books and illustrations for children are often regarded as secondary art forms, The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst, Massachusetts is thoughtfully honoring the art of the picture book. Founded in 2002 by Eric and Barbara Carle, The Carle is a full-scale art museum dedicated to collecting, exhibiting, and celebrating picture book art from around the world. In this paper, I examine how the exhibitions and educational programming of The Carle demonstrate the museum's authentic commitment to and respect for the art of the picture book.

Key words: illustration, art, picture books, Eric Carle, museum.

Through its exhibitions and educational programming, the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst, Massachusetts is celebrating the picture book as a unique and innovative art form. Illustration may still be relegated to minority status in some circles, but at The Carle, picture book art is honored. By hanging the original illustrations in a gallery setting and inviting visitors to engage with the art in a variety of ways, The Carle is fulfilling its mission to cultivate an appreciation for and understanding of the art of the picture book.

Introduction and Background

The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art opened in 2002 as the first full-scale museum in the United States devoted to collecting and exhibiting the art of the picture book. Inspired by their visits to other institutions around the world, Eric and Barbara Carle dreamt of building a home for picture book art in the U.S. The result is a gorgeous 40,000 square foot building nestled in an apple orchard in western Massachusetts that features three galleries, an art studio, a reading library, and an auditorium. At The Carle, illustration is never presented as secondary to other art forms. Rather, the art of the picture book is celebrated as a unique form of art worthy of both serious consideration and joyful celebration.

Exhibitions



A close examination of the exhibition history can tell us much about The Carle and its mission to foster appreciation for the art of the picture book. Since opening, The Carle has showcased works by its renowned founder and other luminaries of the picture book world such as Maurice Sendak, Mitsumasa Anno, and Quentin Blake. Ranging from explorations of individual style to expansive, multi-artist shows, each exhibition has provided visitors with deep insight into artists' creative processes and influences. By encouraging the close contemplation of how artists tell their stories in pictures, The Carle is cultivating an understanding of the picture book as a form of art and laying the foundations for a lifetime of art appreciation.

The Carle has mounted a number of exhibitions celebrating the work of individual picture book artists. Chief Curator H. Nichols B. Clark has succeeded in bringing an exceptional array of talent to The Carle over the last few years. The gallery walls have been hung with the luminous watercolors of Lisbeth Zwerger, the graphic woodcuts of Antonio Frasconi, and the meticulous paintings of Nancy Ekholm Burkert. The art of Leo Lionni, Virginia Lee Burton, William Steig, and many others has also been celebrated through thoughtfully designed exhibitions. These exhibitions that focus on the work of individual illustrators offer museum visitors an opportunity to delve deeply into the personal style of each artist, and they emphasize that picture book creators are inventive artists who communicate and express their visions of the world through visual images.

The Carle exhibitions often explicitly connect illustrators to other artists and to other forms of art, linking picture book art to the worlds of visual art and art history. For the exhibition *Maurice Sendak: Inside and Out*, works by Albrecht Dürer and Winslow Homer, artists who inspired Sendak, were hung in the galleries alongside Sendak's own illustrations. *The Theater of the Page*, an exhibition dedicated to the work of Quentin Blake, included works by artists who influenced Blake such as Honoré Daumier and Pablo Picasso. Other exhibitions have showcased examples of non-book art created by renowned illustrators, further expanding our understanding of picture book creators as artists who may express themselves through a variety of forms and media. Chris Van Allsburg's sculpture, Allen Say's commercial photography and oil paintings, and Virginia Lee Burton's fabric designs have all found their way into the galleries at The



Carle. Including non-book art and works by other artists in the exhibitions draws attention to the incredible artistic range and skill of these picture book creators.

The Carle has also featured a number of multi-artist exhibitions. The 2006 exhibition *The Wonderful Art of Oz* marked the 150th anniversary of the birth of L. Frank Baum and showcased the talents of artists such as Paul Zelinsky, Trina Schart Hyman, and Robert Sabuda. By offering exhibitions that feature multiple artists or multiple interpretations of a theme, The Carle invites visitors to reflect upon the different approaches used by each individual artist. With *The Wonderful Art of Oz*, visitors were able to examine Barry Moser's wood engravings and Charles Santore's watercolors in the same gallery. Collecting and presenting a wide range of illustrations and artistic styles within a single exhibition illuminates how media can affect the mood of a work of art, or how elements such as color and line may influence our perception of a character or setting. Providing opportunities for visitors to consider how artists make choices to convey meaning is another way that the exhibitions at The Carle cultivate an appreciation for the art of the picture book.

Educational Approach

In addition to exhibiting the original art from children's books on the gallery walls, The Carle has been engaging the intelligence and imagination of visitors of all ages through educational programming. Drawing from the Visual Thinking Strategies developed by Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine and the Reggio Emilia model of education, The Carle invites visitors to interact with art in a variety of ways: by looking closely, asking and answering questions, and creating art of their own. Megan Lambert, Instructor of Children's Literature Programs at The Carle, has built on this foundation to develop the Whole Book Approach, a way of reading with children that includes exploration of the production and design elements of the picture book. All across the museum, visitors to The Carle are presented with multiple opportunities for creative inquiry using the art of the picture book as inspiration.

Understanding that many visitors, children and adults alike, can feel intimidated by museums, The Carle is working to change the perception of art as remote and unapproachable (Clark, 2002: 7). Printed gallery guides pose open-ended questions for visitors to consider, and there are no wrong answers here. Bins of books are placed on



benches throughout the galleries for curious visitors to read and refer to. Dummy books and art materials are included in glass cases and on the gallery walls to illustrate how an artist moves from initial idea to finished art. In the recent *Eric Carle: Prints and Papers* exhibition, visitors were encouraged to consider the similarities and differences between pictures of the same animal portrayed through different media. A card on the gallery wall asked: What effect does the medium have on what is or is not possible? As Clark noted in a past interview, putting Visual Thinking Strategies to work at The Carle means helping “the beginning viewer of art find a platform of engagement” (Heller, 2006). Visitors to The Carle acquire tools for looking closely at art and for articulating what they see, tools they can take with them and apply to other art and museum experiences.

The Carle’s educational approach extends beyond the galleries. Visitors of all ages are welcome to explore materials and techniques in the Art Studio or select from among the 4,000 picture books in the Reading Library. Inspired by the ateliers of Reggio Emilia, the Art Studio offers numerous classes and workshops in addition to welcoming drop-in visits. Providing hands-on opportunities to experiment, create, and continue thinking about art is yet another example of how The Carle is promoting an understanding of the art of the picture book. The picture book as a unique art form is particularly emphasized in the Reading Library. Here, the books are arranged by artist and storytime is an interactive event. Children are supported as they attend to and discuss the text, art, and design elements while a picture book is read aloud. The Carle’s Whole Book Approach creates an engaging reading experience that encourages close and serious consideration of the picture book as art.

Conclusion

In spring 2010, The Carle announced that Barbara McClintock gave material from her book *The Heartaches of an English Pussy Cat* to the museum. More recently, German publisher Michael Neugebauer announced that he planned to give his personal collection of Lisbeth Zwerger art to The Carle. These two gifts are only the most recent of many. That so many contributions have been made to the permanent collection of The Carle speaks volumes about the importance of this institution and the role it plays in honoring the art of the picture book. In addition, the higher education partnership with Simmons College and the establishment of the Barbara Elleman Research Library



at The Carle opens up numerous possibilities for future research and scholarship on the art of the picture book. At the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art, the future of this art form looks bright indeed.

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Web Site

Details regarding the exhibition history and educational approach of The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art were found on: www.carlemuseum.org

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