

# Since When Did Children's Books Have a Museum? Interview with H. Nichols B. Clark

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Founded in part by Eric Carle, the author and illustrator of more than 70 books, including the 1969 classic *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art, which opened in 2002 in western Massachusetts, is the first full-scale U.S. museum devoted to national and international picture book art. The museum's goal is to foster connections between visual and verbal literacy. In its three galleries dedicated to rotating exhibitions of picture book, the Museum has had exhibitions on *Avant Garde Russian Children's Books*, *Leo Lionni*, and currently the illustrations from *The Wizard of Oz*. The Museum also provides a hands-on art studio, an auditorium for performances and lectures, a comfortable library for reading and storytelling, a café, and a museum shop stocked with old and new picture book. In this interview, H. Nicholas B. Clark, founding director, talks about the legacy of children's book art and how a museum of this magnitude came to be.

**Steven Heller: It seems that a museum like the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art is long overdue? Would you agree?**

H. Nichols B. Clark: Absolutely. The Carle is the first full-scale museum devoted to children's book illustration. Much wonderful material is housed in libraries, so the good news is it has been well taken care of. But the frustrating news is that these institutions have limited, if any, exhibition space to provide an arena for exhibition. Illustration has long been relegated to stepchild status in the arts in America, so it was almost a self-fulfilling prophecy that museums would not take it seriously.

**Heller: How did the wheels get greased to create such an ambitious museum?**

Clark: Eric and his wife Barbara visited Japan in the early 1980s and were surprised to learn that there were at least 20 museums in that country dedicated to picture book art. This discovery planted the seed. It was not until the early 1990s that they became really serious about bringing the dream to reality.

Eric felt that he had done very well by publishing books and wanted to give back to the industry, the publishers, the artists and authors, the booksellers and the public. The initial idea was a 1,500 square-foot space that would go into an existing building. Then the real pipe dream took hold, and the benchmark became accommodating three school buses a day. This morphed into the current 40,000 square-foot facility with auditorium, art studio, three galler-

ies, reading library and café comprising the public spaces. Eric and Barbara provided the majority of the funding to build the building and get the museum off the ground programmatically. Penguin and HarperCollins publishers were major donors.

**Heller: Even though children’s book art is, in some sense, prescribed by editors and publishers based on what they believe children want, there are many different styles, mannerisms and approaches to it. Do you have a particular curatorial philosophy about what should and should not be exhibited?**

Clark: Coming from a background as an art historian and museum curator, quality is the first and foremost criterion—and that, of course, is highly subjective. There are Caldecott winners that meet my standards, and those that don’t. The work can be visually complex or very simple, and each presents its own set of standards. Like any discipline, there is bad, good, better and best, and I hope that my sensibility tends to the top two categories. Just because something is commercially popular does not necessarily mean that it merits recognition in a museum (no elaboration except perhaps Thomas Kinkade!).

**Heller: You’ve focused on historical manifestations of children’s art. Is it your mission, so to speak, to develop the historical foundation for this art form?**

Clark: Part of what I have been trying to do is to honor some of the grand masters of the genre while they are still alive—so the major exhibitions have been skewed in that direction. And yes, some of the more synthetic exhibitions (Russian, Artists of Margaret Wise Brown) have been historical in basis. This speaks to the desire to present a broad chronological spectrum of children’s book illustration. We do a lot of programming with younger artists, providing the opportunity for our visitors to meet and interact with them.

**Heller: Children’s art has been used in the past (and perhaps is used in the present too) for educational purposes—sometimes good, other times more dubious, as in ideological art in totalitarian countries. You’ve exhibited Russian Revolutionary children’s art. Do you distinguish between good and bad?**

Clark: The Russian exhibition certainly provided a fascinating dialogue between the fortunes of art as shaped by politics. To tell this story, it was logical to exhibit art that may have been compromised, as it were, by political dictates or dictators.

**Heller: The evolution of leading Russian children’s book creator Vladimir Lebedev’s career provides a powerful case in point; he was forced to choose between his art and his life. Consequently, he capitulated to political dictates and his art suffered for it—but he lived.**

Clark: In certain instances with Eric, we have the ability to exhibit the art he rejected beside the final piece. It is very important for the visitor to understand that the artist herself can be dissatisfied with what she has created and out it goes. Sometimes you have to display bad art to enable the visitor to try to understand what constitutes good art.

**Heller: Speaking of good and bad, how in a museum context do you (or do you?) address notions of taboo? I remember decades ago Tomi Ungerer did a book with a snake; prior to that snakes were taboo.**

Clark: I am not sure we have crossed that Rubicon yet! We did exhibit the art from Jerry Pinkney's *The Old African* (his most recent collaboration with Julius Lester), and we were acutely aware that the subject matter was going to be more difficult—not taboo—than what we had previously exhibited. We created signs for the entrance of the gallery, and all my visitor services staff was primed to alert visitors. We were very gratified by the gratitude.

The only really negative mail Eric has ever received was about two very generic nude figures in one of his books, *Draw Me a Star*. We had shown nudes on occasion (Sendak to be sure), and I don't recall any resistance. On the other hand, we have not set out to address a controversial issue through the lens of children's book illustration—yet.

**Heller: So many children's books have become icons of sorts. What are the key components of not only immediate success but longevity?**

Clark: Quality; the marriage of text and image; and how a book gets passed down through the generations. One of my daughter's favorite books is *Caps for Sale* (she is now 21 and still has me read it to her), so I was fascinated to read letter after letter from parents to Esphyr Slobodkina about what a magical book it was. *Goodnight Moon* succeeded despite Anne Carroll Moore's dismissal. There is that magical quality that strikes a chord and endures. Conversely, I think it is very telling that the vast majority of "celebrity" books have a meteoric existence—with emphasis on the crashing and burning—because they are trading on fame and not the deep understanding of what it might take to create a really good book (I'd see Lithgow and Curtis as notable exceptions).

**Heller: Your current exhibit deals with Oz. Is there something about this theme that is the holy grail of children's art?**

Clark: I guess Good versus Evil is a pretty universal theme. The genesis was to celebrate L. Frank Baum and W. W. Denslow's 150th birthdays and try to articulate the evolution of the art of this remarkable book further enhanced, of course, by the 1939 movie. Given its popular artistic appeal, the exhibition also provided us with an opportunity to explore how different artists interpreted the same idea.

**Heller: As director, do you have a five-year plan regarding what you want the audience to take away from the Carle museum?**

Clark: We want the visitor to leave realizing that the Carle is about far more than Eric Carle. We want them to understand before they arrive that we are not a children's museum, but the next step in a journey of museum experiences. We want people to realize that they cannot flunk museum-going. Sadly, too many people think that

appreciating art is a very esoteric science. On a very basic level it can be a wonderful way for families to engage in a fulfilling experience if they ask themselves three questions: What is going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? And what more do you see? These ideas constitute the “Visual Thinking Strategies,” codified by Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine, and are intended to help the beginning viewer of art find a platform of engagement. This is exactly what we hope to do.

**Heller: How do you feel you’re doing given your goal?**

Clark: We are making progress with the first two assumptions [in the five-year plan above]. Making us “The Carle”—like The Guggenheim, The Whitney, The Frick—will take time. I do think that many people are grateful for the toolkit we provide [the “Visual Thinking Strategies”], and the assurance that looking at art is a subjective experience. We’ve also enjoyed a tremendous response to our professional development programs, teaching these issues as well as a more innovative way of reading books with children.

That’s the key—reading with rather than reading to. The audience learns about the parts of the book, the rationales for artistic design, and so on. It’s pretty cool to hear a three-year old talk about the gutter and the spine of a book—we do honor the integrity of the finished product within our walls as well.

**Heller: What benefit is there in exhibiting children’s book art? Isn’t the final product—the book—the real art? Aren’t the raw images simply components that lead up to the purpose and function?**

Clark: Of course. Yes, we are literally deconstructing the book, but we are doing so to try to underscore that in most cases the art can stand on its own. By honoring it in a gallery situation, it does merit being let out of the cellar of disrespect! This honoring is one of Eric’s primary motivations for creating the museum. So call us heretics, but I do think we are doing something very important—not only for the art but for providing many, many people who are nervous about looking at art with a very reassuring entry point. People like what they know.

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**About the Author.** Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA “Designer As Author” at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition* and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).