

Women of Imagination

by Gail Leggio

Historically, women have had a difficult time breaking into professional artists' circles, despite such high-profile successes as Artemisia Gentileschi (c. 1599–1651/55), Rosa Bonheur (1822–99), and Mary Cassatt (1844–1926). But around the turn of the twentieth century a field opened up that offered more women career-building opportunities, the field of illustration. Children's books and magazines—often associated with domestic skills, childrearing and decorating—seemed appropriate venues. The fine art arena is now more gender-neutral, but illustration continues to attract talented women, and they can tackle any kind of subject. Still, contemporary illustration retains strong links to a century-old movement.

There were a number of factors at work in what many consider a golden age of book illustration: innovations in color printing and distribution methods, a growing middle-class audience for books, the design reform movement, which extended beyond home furnishings to the printed page. Celebrated Victorian artists such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones considered book illustration as exciting a field as easel painting. Other artists—Aubrey Beardsley, Arthur Rackham, Walter Crane—chose to devote themselves primarily or exclusively to illustration. One motivation was to get good design into every home, a democratization of beauty. But the Pre-Raphaelites and their followers were also enamored of medieval art, especially manuscript illumination, which emphasized the flatness of the page as picture plane. This aesthetic offered an alternative to the notion of an illusionistic window into space, which had dominated Western painting since the Renaissance. These artists, moreover, saw literature and the visual arts as complementary disciplines, using pictorial means to interpret Malory, Dante and Chaucer, contemporaries such as Tennyson and their own writings.

The explosion of first-rate book illustration coincides with a flowering of fantastic literature by now-classic authors such as Lewis Carroll, George MacDonald, James Barrie and Edgar Allan Poe. Visual storytelling skills, previously the province of workaday realism or history painting, could be put in the service of freewheeling imagination. Critic George Landow explains the importance of the genre: "Essentially, fantastic subjects . . . are devices of transformation . . . the most powerful of which change our usual means of perception. Such informing distortion John Ruskin took to be one of the chief effects of high imagination."¹ Significantly, far from feeling constrained by some notion of slavish fidelity to the text, the prejudice against mere illustration, artists relished the opportunity of—in Rossetti's words—"allegorizing on one's own hook."

Women were full participants in this turn-of-the-century phenomenon.

Kate Greenaway (1846–1901) numbered Ruskin among her admirers. Beatrix Potter (1866–1943) created the perennially popular Peter Rabbit stories and a fine, almost surreal version of *Alice in Wonderland*; she was also a deft naturalist artist. Annie French (1873–1965), Jessie Marion King (1875–1949) and Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh (1865–1933) translated the attenuated elegance of Charles Rennie Mackintosh's Glasgow School into superb illustrations and book bindings. Their American counterparts were equally successful. A fascinating group is profiled in a recent book, *The Red Rose Girls*.² Jessie Willcox Smith (1863–1935), Elizabeth Shippen Green (1871–1954) and Violet Oakley (1874–1961) studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and met as students in Howard Pyle's illustration class at Drexel Institute. Pyle gave them their nickname after the young women, determined to devote themselves to professional careers, set up a home and studio in the Red Rose Inn in Philadelphia. He also recommended Smith and Oakley for an important commission while they were still students. In 1902 Smith and Green collaborated on a calendar published by Frederick A. Stokes as *The Book of the Child*. While the subject may seem stereotypical for women artists, the designs are fresh, with toddlers presented as introspective, self-amusing individuals. In Green's frontispiece, a little girl plays at a makeshift desk built from a chessboard



and books, among them the fashionably Aesthetic Movement title *Artistic Japan*. Smith has a strong sense of composition, obvious in her renowned illustrations for Robert Lewis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verse* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905). In one illustration, *Looking Glass River*, the physical world is limited to the upper third of the image, where two children kneel; the rest is reflection. The mirrored sky full of clouds

Elizabeth Shippen Green
Frontispiece
The Book of the Child, 1902

Trina Schart Hyman,
illustration for
*The Serpent Slayer and
Other Stories of Strong
Women*, 2000

TRINA SCHAT HYMAN

seems an apt emblem for the alternative universe opened by reading.

The nineteenth-century legacy remains vibrant, and many contemporary women illustrators continue to explore the imaginative worlds of children's literature. Trina Schart Hyman acknowledges Jessie Willcox Smith, Arthur Rackham, N.C. Wyeth and Edmund Dulac as influences. The first painting to catch her eye as a child was a Bruegel at



the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where she took classes. After continuing her studies at the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts and the Swedish State Art School, she illustrated her first book around 1960. She began as a line artist and notes that “working in black and white is always a joy—it’s like writing a letter, whereas color is like writing a novel.”³ Her work today is richly colored, with a palette like that of Dulac, who brought Persian miniatures into the heady source mix of nineteenth-century illustration. But the tensile energy of line drives Hyman’s compositions, just as it provided the impetus for Rackham’s organic world of goblin-infested tree roots. Rackham was a fine delineator of dragons, as is Hyman. There are hints of Rackham’s Wagner illustrations (*The Rhinegold and the Walkyrie*, *Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods*, William Heinemann, publisher, 1911) in *The Serpent Slayer and Other Stories of Strong Women*.⁴ Hyman illustrates these tales from across the world with vibrant designs that cleverly allude to different national idioms in the visual arts. In the Japanese tale “Tokyo” the heroine faces a goggle-eyed sea serpent underwater; the figures are illusionistically modeled and the palette a subtle blend of washes. For “The

Marriage of Two Masters,” in contrast, Hyman illustrated the story—derived from Gambian and Sudanese sources—with saturated colors and bold, flat patterns like ethnic textiles.

The title story is a variation on the archetypal sacrificial maiden and dragon theme, although in this version the maiden, Li Chi, uses her wits to defeat the serpent, luring him with a boiling cauldron of honey and then beheading him. In Hyman’s depiction of the climactic moment, the bold undulations of the writhing beast are echoed in the whiplash shapes of his tongue and fangs, and in Li Chi’s scimitar and hair. A more benign dragon appears in another Eastern folktale, “Sister Lace,” about an unjustly imprisoned girl who escapes when a dragon she has crafted out of lace comes alive. The other stories—taken from Punjabi, Native American, Latin American, African, and Middle Eastern, as well as European sources—all emphasize courage and ingenuity. While they could be characterized as both feminist and multicultural, they also have a timeless universality. Hyman won the coveted Caldecott Medal in 1985 for *Saint George and the Dragon*, with text by Margaret Hodges. Throughout the book Hyman frames pages with latticework that suggests medieval manuscript borders. On the cover the title is flanked by the saint, posed against a fruited tree, and the dragon, against a background of smoke and flame; the serpent’s tail coils across the lower border; angels look down from the top. The title page features a moonlit landscape, glimpsed through the lattice and haunted by pale, elfin maidens whose hair is as tangled as an overgrown garden. The effect suggests the eccentric fin-de-siècle *symboliste* Jan Toorop. Hyman’s work exemplifies the method of many contemporary illustrators, who use the art of the past as a point of departure for their own experiments. The results are often very original works of arts with sophisticated allusions to the visual heritage that will appeal to both children and adults.

Picture-book creator Ruth Sanderson made a similar point in a recent artist’s statement: “In the field of illustration it is acceptable to draw upon any source of inspiration from any period in art, without apologies. I simply tell a story in the style which I find the most appropriate for the subject matter.”³⁵ Sanderson is one of many children’s books illustrators who likes to tell her own stories, frequently derived from traditional sources. She based *The Golden Mare, the Firebird and Magic Ring* (2001) on a classic Russian folktale. One two-page spread, repeated as a vignette on the back cover, depicts a ship sailing into a delicately colored sunrise; the pinks and purples of the clouds are evidence of her admiration for the Hudson River School. *The Golden Mare* is printed on parchment-colored paper with gold accents, giving it an antique look. The title page, with its stylized firebirds against black borders, is particularly striking. Sanderson’s human figures are more conventionally naturalistic; she works in the adventure-story mode of N.C. Wyeth and Howard Pyle. Her taste for historical detail and ripe color, testifying to her enthusiasm for the Pre-Raphaelites, can be very persuasive. In *Papa Gatto* (Little, Brown and Company, 1995), a hybrid of Italian folk-



Kinuko Y. Craft,
illustration for
Cupid and Psyche,
1996 KINUKO Y. CRAFT

tales with elements of Cinderella and Puss-in-Boots, the title feline—in full Renaissance finery—easily upstages the human prince. As Greta Garbo, perhaps apocryphally, remarked after seeing Jean Cocteau’s 1945 cinematic fantasy *La Belle et la Bête*, “give me back my beautiful beast.”

Fairytales may be the most popular genre for illustrators, although the imaginative freedom and historical richness they inspire can have other uses. The Dallas Opera commissioned Kinuko Y. Craft, who has been a professional illustrator for forty years, to design a set of posters for the four operas of Wagner’s *Der Ring des Niebelungen* in 1999. Craft’s paintings are notable for both luminosity and depth, achieved by glazing translucent layers of oil color over a watercolor base. Her *Cupid and Psyche* (1996)—retold by the artist’s daughter, Marie Charlotte Craft—is taken from Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass* (second century A.D.). The story of the beauty who wins the love of a god, loses him through her distrust and ranges from Hades to Olympus to win another chance has inspired generations of artists, including Raphael and his pupils, at the Villa Farnesina in Rome, and Edward Burne-Jones, whose dining room décor (1872–81) for George Howard was recreated for the Metropolitan Museum’s 1998 exhibi-

tion.⁶ Although she was born in Japan and began her studies there, before finishing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Craft is an eclectic artist. She has illustrated a number of classical myths—*Pegasus* (1998) and *King Midas and the Golden Touch* (1999)—but does not mimic the flat figure-ground compositions associated with Greek vase painting. Archaeological detail is enveloped in atmospheric space. Many of the illustrations in *Cupid and Psyche* suggest German Romanticism. A diminutive Psyche is dwarfed by huge columns in a dusky space that looks like an avant-garde set for a nineteenth-century opera. Predella panels depict Psyche crossing the Styx and cowering before the three-headed hound Cerberus. Plumbing the murkiest of our fears, these images suggest why Craft is in demand for science fiction and fantasy books, illustrating Isaac Asimov, Ursula Le Guin and the marvelous vampire novelist Tanith Lee, among others. Other images are stunning in their voluptuous color. A portrait of Proserpine, front-on, wearing an elaborate headdress and jewels, is framed with a Greek key border and adorned with the goddess's emblematic pomegranate. Her face remains in shadow as she presents the box that is the object of Psyche's quest, as if she were venturing just outside her realm of perpetual twilight. In another full-page scene, Psyche, alone on a hill, has opened the box and released the sleep of the dead. Her eyes close, the box hangs open in mid-air, and she swoons in a drift of white flowers. Many of Craft's figures are dreamers, as on the cover of her *Sleeping Beauty* (2002). The princess's bower is overgrown with rose vines. Burne-Jones pursued this motif in his Briar Rose series. This trance-like state

suggests the intuitive power hidden in all of us when we venture outside the purely rational.

Today, designers for adult books frequently choose photographs or reproductions of historic works for book covers. But original art can still be remarkably effective in drawing readers to particular titles or kinds of literature.



Cathleen Toelke, cover illustration for *Shark Dialogues*, 1993

CATHELEN TOELKE

Freelance illustrator Cathleen Toelke has made a specialty of Latin American culture. Even readers unfamiliar with her name instinctively respond to her vibrant, smoky colors and strong, stylized compositions, on the covers of books by Oscar Hijuelos, Laura Esquivel and Nobel-laureate Gabriel García Márquez. Her cover for a 1990 edition of Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* has the eeriness of a dream, with a sleeping figure posed before a lunar backdrop with geometric mountains. The brown-skinned Tropical Couple, used for the cover of Márquez's *Collected Novellas: Leaf Storm, No One Writes to the Colonel, Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1990), brings monumentality to a relatively small space. Her powerfully simplified forms recall Diego Rivera's murals and the Art Deco illustrations of Rockwell Kent. Her use of gouache, an opaque watercolor, and slightly off-kilter intimacy reminds me of Frida Kahlo's underappreciated contemporary Maria Izquierdos. Toelke, who has traveled in Mexico and Colombia, never settles for clichés. Instead, she plays astutely with idioms such as oversized palm fronds, boldly patterned textiles and flowing black hair, as in the exuberant cover for Kiara Davenport's 1993 novel *Shark Dialogues*. While such large-figure compositions are striking, Toelke also gives under-populated scenes their own psychological energy. Her CD/cassette cover for the 1991 *Dance Beneath the Diamond Sky* (Vacca/Moran recording artists) is an undulating nocturnal landscape haunted by twisted trees, exotic birds and a mysteriously simple white cube of a house. While many of her designs push the figures up against the picture frame, she sometimes explores recessive space in eloquent ways. Márquez's *Strange Pilgrims* is a collection of twelve stories about Latin American characters traveling in Europe. Toelke's 1994 cover expresses their sense of disorientation with skewed perspective, as well as the poignant detail of portable icons displayed on a table. The white-suited figure slumped uneasily in the tiny room is made more vulnerable by the blood-red curtains that frame the tableau. Toelke has found a visual style that captures the flavor of Magical Realism, the literary genre that focuses on the porous membrane between the earthbound and the otherworldly.⁷

NOTES

1. George P. Landow, "And the World Became Strange: Realms of Literary Fantasy" in Diana L. Johnson, *Fantastic Illustration and Design in Britain 1850–1930* (Providence: Rhode Island School of Design, 1979), p. 31.
2. Alice A. Carter, *The Red Rose Girls: An Uncommon Story of Art and Love* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2002). The Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, presented an exhibition of the artists' works in early 2004. On the Web at www.nrm.org
3. Online biography, <http://www.ortakales.com/illustrators/Hyman.html>
4. Retold by Katrin Tchana (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2000).
5. Letter to the author, March 13, 2004.
6. Stephen Wildman and John Christian, with essays by Alan Crawford and Laurence des Cars, *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist-Dreamer* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, distributed by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998), pp. 119–127.
7. A number of artists discussed here were featured in early 2004 in "Women in Illustration: Contemporary Visions and Voices" at the Norman Rockwell Museum.