

## The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art

Naomi Hamer

‘It has been our dream to build a museum for children and families, teachers and librarians, scholars and everyone interested in the art of the picture book – a museum to delight, entertain, surprise and educate.’ (Eric and Barbara Carle)



Figure 1: The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art.  
Photo by Paul Shoul © The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art

The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art, also affectionately known as ‘The Carle’, is the first full-scale museum in the United States focused specifically on national and international picturebook art. Inspired by visits to picturebook galleries and museums in Japan, celebrated picturebook author Eric Carle and his wife Barbara aimed to create a specialized museum near their home in Western Massachusetts. Their goal was reached in 2002 with the founding of The Carle on the grounds of Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts.

As a visitor to The Carle, your experience begins with the distinctive design of the museum building itself. Both the architectural and interior design of the museum adopt the

visual aesthetic and lightness of Carle's artistic style. The spacious and bright lobby includes four of Carle's large hand-painted panels of paper collage in vibrant colours against the white walls. The architectural firm Juster Pope Frazier was selected for the 40,000 square foot building. Earl Pope, the primary designer described his vision of the building as 'dignified, serene and elevating for both children and adults, while treating the art with respect' (Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art, 2003, p. 2). The museum was designed as an environmentally ethical building that cultivates an atmosphere framed by its natural setting complete with an apple orchard on the grounds. A whimsical large-scale steel sculpture 'The ELEPHANT' by picturebook author Mo Willems extends the design concept of the architecture into the outdoor space.



Figure 2: "The Red Elephant" by Mo Willems.  
Photo by Kristin Angel © The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art.

The Carle has mounted more than 80 exhibitions in its three galleries with a permanent collection of more than 6,000 art pieces and 13,000 objects. The founding director and chief curator H. Nichols B. Clark, and current chief curator Ellen Seiter have produced signature exhibits for the gallery spaces, often working in collaboration with guest curators who contribute lectures and workshops. During a March 2016 visit, I had the opportunity to attend the opening talk by guest curator (and esteemed children's book

historian and critic) Leonard Marcus, for 'Magician of the Modern: the Art of Leonard Weisgard' (8 March to 5 June 2016). The display of Weisgard's original artwork revealed the significant role of conservation and restoration as part of The Carle's mandate. In the exhibition's catalogue, executive director Alexandra Kennedy describes the relevance of the restoration of 20 paintings never before shown publicly as well as the future remediation of more pieces (Kennedy Acknowledgments).

Exhibitions aim to celebrate artistic process while engaging young people in the world of the illustrations. 'The Art and Whimsy by Mo Willems' curated by Clark in 2013-2014 at The Carle, and adapted for the New York Historical Society in 2016, included an audio guide narrated by Willems to encourage a focus on his artistic process, while an interactive reading area in the gallery was positioned inside the bus from *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* In 2016-2017, the exhibit 'Brown Bear Turns 50' (13 September 2016 to 19 March 2017) offers a celebration of Carle's *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* including original art work, while a related pop-up exhibition invites interaction with large reproductions of Carle's characters on display at outdoor spaces around Amherst. Two other exhibitions in 2016-2017 will focus on author/artist collaboration 'Louis Darling: Drawing the Words of Beverly Cleary' (17 May to 27 November 2016); and 'It's Me, Eloise: The Voice of Kay Thompson and the Art of Hilary Knight' (14 February to 4 June 2017).

The Carle's educational approach is framed by learner-centred methods such as Visual Thinking Strategies and the Reggio Emilia model of education ('Education-Our Approach'). An art studio for young visitors emphasizes creativity and hands-on learning with a range of materials from pastel to plaster, and a Reading Library hosts storytime using the Whole Book Approach. Developed by educator and Simmons College senior lecturer, Megan Dowd Lambert in collaboration with The Carle, this approach invites critical engagement with whole picturebook design including endpapers, gutters and typography. I am currently using Lambert's text, *Reading Picture Books with Children* (2015) in an undergraduate course at the University of Winnipeg. The students training to be teachers and early childhood educators have found it to be informative and accessible.





Figure 3: A story session at the Carle  
Photo by Kristin Angel © The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art.

The educational programme at the Carle extends to professional training in the Whole Book Approach, and on-site graduate programmes in Children's Literature offered by Simmons College. The museum's auditorium also serves as a venue for scholarly events, storytelling sessions, performances and concerts. The Barbara Elleman Research Library includes over one thousand volumes for the use by scholars, and the Art Studio Library has a non-circulating collection for art education programming.

There is a museum shop with an extensive collection of picturebooks and scholarly work as well as a fantastic selection of gifts and a café which serves delicious complimentary coffee from local roaster Esselon Coffee. The Atkins Farms Country Market is around the corner; the Yiddish Book Centre is also located on the Hampshire College campus and both Amherst and nearby Northampton have various other art and literary sites to offer visitors for a day or weekend trip to The Carle.

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**Museum website:** <http://www.carlemuseum.org/>

## References

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