Representations of Art and Art Museums in Children's Picture Books

[Review of: P. Nodelman (2025) Representations of Art and Art Museums in Children's Picture Books]

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Representations of Art and Art Museums in Children's Picture Books
by Perry Nodelman
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Perry Nodelman is a Canadian emeritus professor who has published extensively on children's picture books and is himself an author of fiction for children. Moreover, his expertise in the field is complemented by first-hand experience as a volunteer guiding children around in art museums. The goal of *Representations of Art*, drawing on analyses of a few hundred children's picture books published in the past 30-40 years, is to chart how children's interaction with art and art museums is visually and verbally narrated in such books. Surprisingly, the monograph itself contains no pictures. One reason is that the author feared that randomly selecting a few pictures would detract from the "astonishing consistency" (p. xi) of the books' problems. Another is that Bloomsbury apparently did not allow him to include *colored* pictures – which is rather odd for a book in a series called "Research in Illustration."

While Nodelman has no doubt that the picture books "intend to encourage young readers' enjoyment and understanding of art and art museums by offering information about them" (p.85), he is very critical of how they do so. He begins by noting that the architecture of the depicted art museums is usually as intimidating as such buildings are in real life (say, with a flight of steps to the entrance, huge doors, pillars). All this sets art museums apart from ordinary life, instead of presenting them as hospitable, and as part of the everyday world.

More worrisome, Nodelman finds that by and large the books pay very little attention to art in its own right, nor is, typically, information provided about styles and historical backgrounds, while the represented art often heavily simplifies the visual qualities of the originals. Moreover, the art depicted is not very diverse: it constitutes mostly of post-19th c. European and American paintings (rarely

sculptures) and underrepresents portraits and landscapes. The author identifies several recurring problems. In the first place the books' authors repeat a mistake the author attributes to museum education experts as well: "art is less importantly something to learn about than it is an opportunity for learning general skills" (p.2). Nodelman would have wanted to see the children's picture books sparking children's joy in engaging with art. Instead, the artworks' main role is sparking *fun*. This fun is achieved by presenting the art as a mirror that helps children discover their own identity, or as a puzzle to be solved, or by transforming painted persons into real ones, or as an excuse for creating mayhem in the museum – or all of these together. The visiting children mimic postures of painted people, enter canvases, change them, combine them … In short, they interact with them physically, thereby often doing precisely the opposite of what most museums counsel: look, don't touch. Rather than being there to be contemplated, understood, or emotionally responded to, the books suggest to their young target audience, art is a toy, a pretext for wild behavior and a ploy to feed egocentredness. In view of this latter, it is no coincidence, Nodelman suggests, that quite some books end by encouraging young readers to make masterpieces themselves. He is also critical of the tendency that, in order to win children's attention, the books suggest that any interpretation of a painting is as good as any other (called "whatever" interpretations, p.21).

He also signals that the supposed non-conformity of great artists tends to get shifted from the art itself to the artist's struggles to create this art. It is as if the books' makers translate the quality of great art to disrupt conventional ways of seeing and experiencing the world into storylines in which children defy conventions by messing around with this very art and brazenly make it subservient to their own goals.

A large part of Nodelman's study is taken up by describing the books he finds disappointingly inappropriate to making children enthusiastic about art. The author is not blind to the key reason underlying the problematic nature of most books: their need to tell a story, with characters involved in events and actions. One example among many is a discussion of a book referencing Hopper's *Nighthawks*. While this painting surely evokes a sense of loneliness and isolation, Nodelman outlines how the story around it ignores this mood, and misleadingly turns the painting into an illustration in a story about friendship (pp.6-7).

Nodelman briefly mentions that nowadays museums are eager to pay structurally more attention to artists from groups that have long been ignored and underrepresented, such as women, Indigenous people, and persons of color. He proposes that the fact that Frida Kahlo ticks various diversity boxes is one of the reasons her work features in so many children's books (another popular artist is the rebellious Vincent van Gogh). On the one hand, this is a good thing, as it presumably helps children (and adults) from underprivileged communities relate to museum art. On the other hand, emphasis on such art runs the risk of becoming merely activist, and thereby to turn into a vehicle for teaching things about society at large rather than focus on the art in its own right: activism (however recommendable the cause) and aesthetic quality make for uneasy bedfellows. Perhaps this sensitive topic would have deserved more discussion – although arguably this issue is not only pertinent for children's picture books.

In Nodelman's view both art museums and children's picture books about art should work harder to "encourage creative and critical responses to artworks" (p.4). Ideally, they should inform children about a painting's specific style and about art movements, without steering them into responses that are, for one reason or another, considered the "right" ones. The museums and the books should encourage curiosity and stimulate dialogue. Moreover, they should not only focus on triggering happy, positive emotions: "Art worth asking questions about is unsettling" (p.162). For instance, in a rare moment of enthusiasm, Nodelman praises Thé Tjong-Khing's

book about Jeroen Bosch because in it the monsters remain "horrifically Bosch-like" (p.141). Since it focuses on painting styles, incidentally, Tjong-Khing's wordless *Art with Tart* would probably also be to Nodelman's liking.

It is a pity that *Representations of Art* has no final chapter recapitulating and evaluating the author's conclusions, drawing on his own experience as a museum guide. This is how I would sum them up: The books misleadingly generalize how children respond to art in reality, since 1) each child reacts differently to art- ranging from complete boredom to unalloyed enthusiasm; 2) children often already know a lot about museums and art and do not approach art expecting that it teaches them how to become artists themselves; 3) most children by no means consider art primarily as a tool aiding them to explore their own identity; 4) children are often open-minded and ready to be surprised - also by "difficult" (e.g., abstract) art.

On the whole I sympathize with Nodelman's concern that the books fall short of their main goal: helping children to appreciate art. That said, his long catalogue of plots to demonstrate the books' inadequacies becomes somewhat monotonous as well as disheartening. The very fact that the author finds so few books that live up to his expectations makes clear how difficult the challenge of their creators is: how to do justice to the art while at the same time creating an entertaining or interesting story? Sometimes the author strikes me as being too uncompromising. For instance, is it really such a bad thing that museums are presented - architecturally as well as logistically - as different from "ordinary life"? Surely, it is not just negative that children learn that art museums - like, say, churches, concert halls, and libraries - are special spaces demanding specific behaviors and discouraging others (such as creating mayhem)? And are picture books encouraging interactions with paintings always to be condemned? Is imitating poses of people in Rembrandt paintings, in Dick Bruna's *Miffy* series (aimed at children 4-8 years) reprehensible? Or is wrongly claiming that Miffy's and Vermeer's women's dresses are "exactly the same colors"? {p. 114). After all, teaching children (and adults) new things often begins by showing similarities between these new things with what they already are familiar with. For that matter, perhaps the exhortation to children to create their own art after visiting a museum feeds children's egocentricity, but it arguably also stimulates the kind of creative imitation that may lead to appreciation.

I fully agree with Nedelman, quoting Olga Hubard, that "two important contributions of art - the discovery of personal significance and the development of cultural awareness - enrich rather than exclude each other" (p.40). *Representations of Art* meticulously and convincingly charts how difficult it is to find a balance between these two.