

Caldecott Award
Acceptance 1975



Gerald
McDermott

Imagine an ancient and mysterious figure who sits alone on the desert plain. He wears a dark ceremonial mask, and he is robed in desert hues of ocher, gold, and brown. By his side is a clay pot, decorated with magic symbols, and filled with bits of wood, feather, and stone. From these materials, he will create the feathered shaft that releases a spirit into solar flight.

This is the Arrowmaker, a pivotal figure in the drama of *Arrow to the Sun*. Of all the mythic characters who act out their roles in my books and films, he is the one who especially intrigues and interests me. He is a shaman who possesses the ability to see where others fail to see. He can penetrate the unyielding surface of reality with what has been called the open eye. Wordlessly gazing, the Arrowmaker perceives an essential truth and is inspired to action. He gives his vision tangible form by creating a special arrow that will send the hero on his transcendent journey to the sun. The Arrowmaker has thus acted as a liaison between the everyday world and the realm of dreams. He connects the sphere of the intellect with the sphere of intuition.

Many people believe that the role of the artist is like that of the shaman and, in fact, this role has grown directly from our archaic need for an interpreter of the image world obscured by common sight. The artist must attempt the shamanic task of penetrating surface reality to perceive a universal truth; that is, he draws out the essence of the idea. In transforming this vision into powerful graphic shape, he hopes to communicate it to others. In the process, he can expand our visual sense and enhance our ability to see with an open eye. The artist, like the Arrowmaker, assists in releasing the imagination.

Imagination. Image-ination. The ability to call up spontaneously the visual forms of our inner life. Children seem to possess the open eye, a direct access to "the unpolluted rivers

of perception and imagination."* But early in childhood, swiftly, almost inexorably, our natural perceptual responses, instead of being cultivated, are eradicated. Other sensibilities are crushed as well, but visual perception seems particularly susceptible to debasement. As Herbert Read has described it, "Somewhere in the process of upbringing, in the environment we have made for ourselves, there exists a corroding influence [that] . . . prevents the development of aesthetic consciousness."**

We have all flailed impotently at the most obvious of these corroding factors: an environment cluttered with synthetic junk, the cheapening influence of advertising stereotypes, the banal imagery of television. We continually bemoan their pervasiveness and lament their trivializing influence upon our sensibilities. We have almost ritualized our complaints against these massive realities which are largely beyond our control.

Meanwhile, what about the area of visual experience that we as professionals can control — the picture book. Have we brought to our task as broad a knowledge of art as we have of the written word? Do we encourage illustrators and designers to experiment and to push forward beyond conventional solutions? Do we insist that contemporary artists be true to their artistic age? If we have closed ourselves off from the larger field of the fine arts, if we have established a hermetic world, then we limit our ability to distinguish bad art from good art. This is a crucial distinction, and I refer those who minimize its importance to John Rowe Townsend, who has offered what he feels is "[o]ne incontrovertible truth . . . to those who think serious artistic endeavor is wasted on a child audience: namely, that even if children do not always appreciate the best when they see it, they will have no chance of appreciating it if they never see it."

A picture book of artistic integrity will often be the only place where a child can expand his imagination and direct his gaze toward beauty. In this medium, it is possible to create a dynamic relationship between the visual and the verbal. The

* Herbert Read, *Icon and Idea*. Schocken. 1965, p. 139.

** *Ibid.*, p. 138.

techniques of storytelling and the compelling serial imagery together convey the force of exciting ideas. In form and content, the picture book can become an essential element in the child's evolving aesthetic consciousness, and the artist creating a picture book has an opportunity — and a special responsibility — to nurture the development of his young audience's visual perception.

This certainly sounds like a heavy burden for that cloistered breed, the picture book artist, separated as he is from the dynamism of modern art. Often shunned by his brethren in other graphic disciplines, he is looked upon as a thumb-sucking regressive, re-creating his nursery fantasies in pastel hues. Can the picture book artist really be expected to devote himself to raising the art consciousness of a new generation? Perhaps he would, if we demanded that he undertake this responsibility. Yet in our sometimes desperate need to be sentimental about childhood, we ask that the picture book artist produce an art that is easily accessible and realistic in the most trivial sense, reality being the lowest level of cognition.

Often the only expectation of the picture book is that it provide pretty settings for an easy vocabulary or comic-strip clichés that can divert and entertain as they lure the neophyte reader into the realm of words. Once the truly serious task of acquiring reading skills is accomplished, the images cease to be valuable — if indeed they ever were valuable — and they are dispensed with. The reader has now graduated from the precisely designated picture book category. There is no mistaking it, it is printed on the flap — Ages 5-8 — and must be so. The powerful potential of art to communicate what cannot be expressed in words is dismissed and consigned to the nursery along with toys that have been outgrown.

Our language is rich and powerful. We strive to learn it, to master it, to put it at our service as a means of communication and expression. But in our intense effort to verbalize, analyze, and categorize all experience, we tend to overlook the importance of the visual as a means of personal communi-

cation and personal expression. This has resulted in a dichotomy between the values we assign to our word-sense and those we assign to our image-sense. We set a goal to acquire a vocabulary, a grammar, and — if we are ultimately to enjoy the riches of our language — a knowledge of literary tradition and contemporary writing. Yet we have no such aspirations for the development of our visual sense. This faculty is held in such low esteem, deemed so expendable, that few of us even have the equivalent of an alphabet. As a result, our natural, spontaneous, child-response to form and color is left untended, to wither away.

What remains is a kind of art-blindness that makes us ill at ease with any but the most banal and representational imagery — that is, those images that can be narrowly defined or put into words. To the extent an image is representational, it narrows interpretation. To the extent an image cancels out interpretation, it sterilizes the imagination. We all know many adults who feel uncomfortable with, if not actually hostile to, images that communicate in an interpretive, stylized, or abstract manner. Yet children, with their open eye, initially feel no such hostility. Indeed, it has been my experience that even the youngest children respond in a direct and receptive manner to the most stylized of images. I believe this quality is manifested in the magic and symbolism of their own paintings.

Our childhood ease with the symbolic can be seen in graphic ways. For example, when I've had the opportunity to share the story of *Arrow to the Sun* with small children, they often react through their art. This Pueblo tale culminates, with the masked celebrants moving rhythmically, in an exultant "Dance of Life." We pretend that the children have also been invited to join in the dance. In order to participate, they are to imagine masks and costumes for themselves — not realistic self-portraits but abstract designs that will serve as symbolic representations. From the hands of eight- and nine-year-olds, gripping fat brushes heavy with paint, come exciting and stylized images. Most of the children can make the leap of

imagination to this rather abstract concept—to represent themselves in a graphic and symbolic way. They have felt the force of the symbols on the pages of the book and eagerly express themselves in a similar manner. They plunge with delight into a world of color and form and emerge with images of meaning and beauty.

Within a brief time, however, this balance of perception and imagination will be upset. The expression of ideas will become narrowed, and the art will become contrived and awkward. The child's ability to receive the messages of symbolic form will rapidly diminish. This will happen because visual expression and communication will be dismissed as invalid. The child's spontaneous image sense will be underestimated and left undeveloped. Eventually, it will be submerged in the deadening tide of inferior visual representation. We cannot hope to reverse this stultifying process until we overcome our denial of the force and value of art and make it an integral part of our lives.

How can we begin to salvage and develop the visual sensibilities of a new generation—and our own as well? In the broadest sense, we have already begun. The people gathered here have been working toward this goal most of their professional lives by creating and selecting fine picture books and by spreading them open before the eyes of the young. In a specific sense, in awarding the Caldecott Medal, you not only honor the artist for a singular achievement, but you also commission that artist to pierce the screen of convention. You challenge the individual to explore and experiment in future graphic work. I am especially grateful that this honor should now come to me, and I will try to respond to your challenge.

Beyond what we have all accomplished, it is our task, as artists, publishers, librarians, and teachers, to expand our awareness of the larger world of the fine arts and to recognize the potential force of art in our lives—to honor art as it opens the human spirit to infinite domains of possibility and fulfillment. To reduce the art in a picture book to a word-prop or to dismiss the art in our lives as merely ornament is

to sterilize our sensibility. Art is "an energy of the senses, that must continually convert the dead rain of matter into the radiant images of life."* Instead of devaluing our visual sense, we should develop it. It requires active support, not in a fragmentary way, but through a comprehensive new program that forms an integral part of our education. I hope to be able to make a personal contribution in the design of such a program. We must strive to sustain an organic continuity of imaginative freedom beginning with the poetic and spontaneous vision of childhood and growing into a fully developed aesthetic consciousness.

* *Ibid.*, p. 140.