

The Visual Artist and the Creative Process in Picture Books

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I begin this talk with a great sense of inadequacy because I realize how difficult it is to talk about pictures and because words cannot substitute for sensory experience and perceptual awareness. Accepting this limitation, I would like to share with you what I experience when I am working on a picture book.

One of the greatest pleasures in creating picture books is the way I change and grow and travel on to many new levels of existence. I love picture books. As a visual artist I find it a necessity to make art and I find the book form an ideal way to express my ideas. Through picture books and fine limited-edition books - what the French call 'livre d'artiste' - I can create a world for myself. My work is a result of my ideas as an artist, and is subject to change as my experience changes. By making books I am involved not just with pictures, but with words and ideas, as well, and find out in the process what is important to myself. Also, by making books I can create a world and live twice: once when I have an experience or idea, and then again when I re-create it. Through picture books I can talk to myself and also to others.

Murray McCain, in *Books*, says that children's books "are the first books in our lives in which we can experience and discover many surprises and feelings and what growing up is like and loving and all the really big things there are" [*sic*]. In my visual memory I can still recall the pictures from my picture books as a child. I can also remember the cut-out paper dolls that I used to cut and play with. Unconsciously, perhaps, I have retained this child-like love for cutting paper as can be seen in my collage pictures.

Picture books are a precious art form which combines word and picture. Picture books create many different worlds for a child, worlds in which art, music, literature, language and ideas can be discovered, experienced and explored. Comenius, the seventeenth-century scholar/educator, already knew this and in the *Orbis Pictus* used pictures to teach a language. But pictures also *are* a language, and it is important that we understand this visual language because what we see is a major part of what we know. All children's books will influence the way in which the child will see. But artistically valuable books will educate the child's taste and visual sense. They will stimulate imagination. They will also encourage the child to create his own image of life and thus help him find his own way. Through picture books we can help develop visual literacy.

Creating picture books demands great discipline. After having gone through the experience a number of times, I am quite aware of the different phases of my work. I will try to describe the process for you. Picture book making is an activity that demands all of my attention and so it is necessary to be alive, because it is so easy for our spirits to be dead. By "to be alive," I mean to have dreams, to have desire, to have ideas and feelings, to love, to transform the realities of the spirit. It is important to be able to visualize, which is the ability to think and form multiple images in the mind. What I find exciting, and what is probably most important, is the forming of mental pictures that I have never seen before and the being able to put them down as they move through my mind. It is not the visualizing of an idea that takes time, however, as the sculptor Brancusi has declared: to make art is easy, but the difficulty is to be in a state to make it. During this phase I am in a very vulnerable state and might even feel insecure. Every time I begin a project it is as if it's the first time I am attempting a book. There is an uncertainty. But then I also have reassurance in the fact that I have done it before. But having created books before does not guarantee that I can do it again. My mind seems to be constantly working on problems, even in my dreams. Finally there comes a time when I cannot put off getting into the work and it is necessary consciously to start selecting the materials, ideas I have taken in. This phase may take days, weeks, months, sometimes only a few minutes; every artist works in a different way. This phase requires great discipline and concentration.

The searching for images often involves playing around with a number of possibilities. I find solitude is necessary. While working on a picture I have a conversation with it constantly. Through collage it is possible to try out endless numbers of combinations and find the best possible solution. This is why I find collage such a creative medium to work in. It is not planned completely, but is in part discovered and revealed. It is necessary to play with the materials, but this is creative play. There is a difference between the play of children and artists. Children's play is aimless; they do not play with the aim of creating something lasting whereas the artist creates a "passionate being", a final work. In *A Philosophy of Literature*, Raymond Tschumi has stated that "The greatest power of the artist, his dazzling weapon, is the freedom he is allowed to take with what becomes his landscapes, his characters and his ideas; it is the meaning that he gives to an otherwise unformed, uncreated, meaningless existence". With collage, collagraphs and other forms of printmaking, I create pictures to form a framework through which I can express my ideas. By making collages from monoprints (textured papers) that I paint, and by tearing and cutting, I can exploit the accidental. Collage is a way of making pictures by pasting, cutting and tearing paper. Discovering and developing the unexpected configurations is a form of visual play. Let me tell you about my early attempts at collage. In 1967 I illustrated a dragon story written by Ted Wood for which I prepared twenty pictures. This took me almost a year to complete. It was a most difficult time because I was trying to find my own way, and I knew that if I wanted to be good, I would have to be original. In examining these collage pictures I find that I have used sophisticated monoprints as backgrounds. The figures are almost

silhouette images with very little detail or none at all. From here I gradually added other elements into my work.

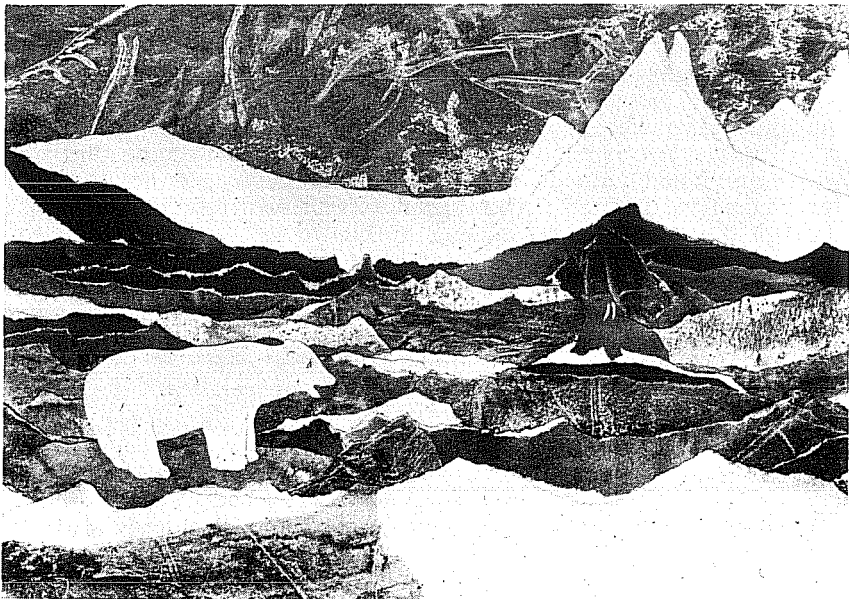
Every book represents a new world I have to enter with a unique set of problems I will have to confront. After receiving a manuscript I read it many times for days, weeks, and even months, until my mind begins to formulate images spontaneously. This takes a lot of energy. To receive and realize new ideas, to be able to form mental pictures, requires a special kind of devotion, tranquility and self-confidence. For me to do my work it is necessary to be inspired by the piece of literature I am working with, and to believe in it, to have a great feeling and love for it.

During the first phase when I take ideas in to be digested, ideas come from everywhere. Everything I do and feel and hear and think and read is absorbed and becomes part of my memory or unconscious. Artistic structure does not evolve in a single line of thought but on several superimposed strands at once. The steps may include scribbles, sketches, drawings, failed work, thoughts, conversations, research and reading. From all these processed images, some predominate, and then I make a selection. Some ideas will crystallize, others won't. For example, ideas and inspiration for the pictures in *The Wind Has Wings: Poems from Canada* came from the poems themselves. Poets draw pictures too. They do it with words instead of with paint, pencils or collage. And, like the artist, the poet doesn't literally copy what he sees. He is able to describe things in an exciting way--the way his imagination sees them. This is similar to making visual pictures.

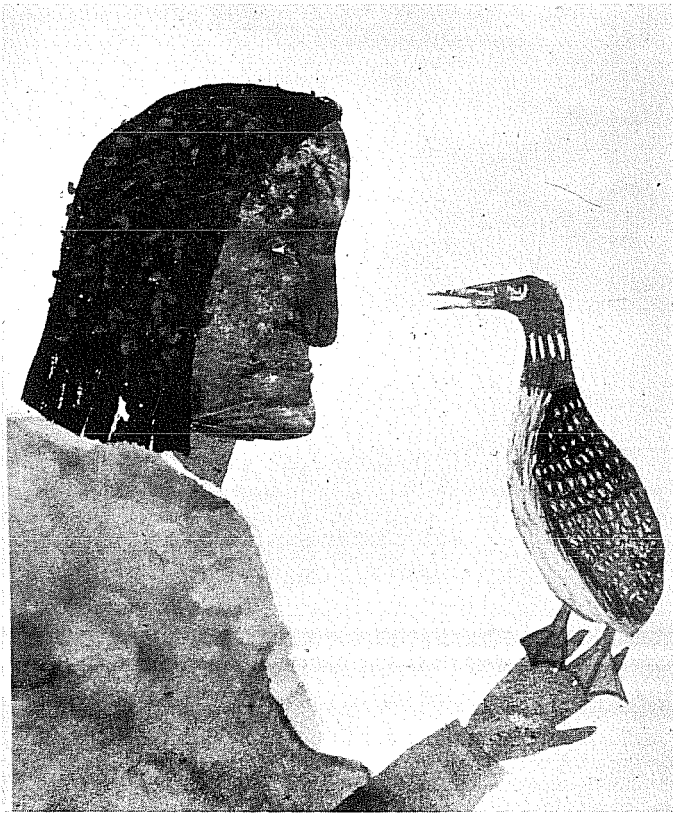
In the Indian legends, *How Summer Came to Canada* and *The Mountain Goats of Temlaham*, it was necessary to research Tsimshian and Micmac artifacts in order to understand more fully their art. I was greatly influenced by Tsimshian art and tried to recreate the ceremonies the Indians might have had. It was necessary to try to re-create their spectacular environment along the shores of the Pacific against the mountain ranges. You have to put yourself in the right frame of mind to imagine the legend being re-enacted for the glorification of chiefs, for the spiritual benefit of individuals, and for the pleasure and instruction of spectators. It was important to convey the communication they had with nature and animals, and their highly developed art forms. I received a Canada Council travel grant to visit British Columbia. I went through the mountains by air and by bus to get impressions of the spectacular environment. I did research at various museums: the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia; The Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto; the McCord Museum, McGill University; and the National Museum of Man in Ottawa. At times, when visualizing a book, I find it necessary to comprehend the total structure, rather than to analyse single elements. For example, when working on *Summer and Temlaham*, which were both 32-page books, certain pages were worked out more easily than others, and there was no order in the way the sequence evolved.

During the final phase it is possible to reject bad ideas and search for better ones if necessary. Finally a picture will emerge with an independent life of its own. The picture acts like a living person with whom I can converse. If the picture can talk back to me, it will also be capable of talking to others.

Through collage I have found I can create feelings and moods in a contemporary way. With colour I can express feelings of ice and frost and cold in contrast to warmth and fertility. Paper edges have a character of their own. Torn paper may represent snow.

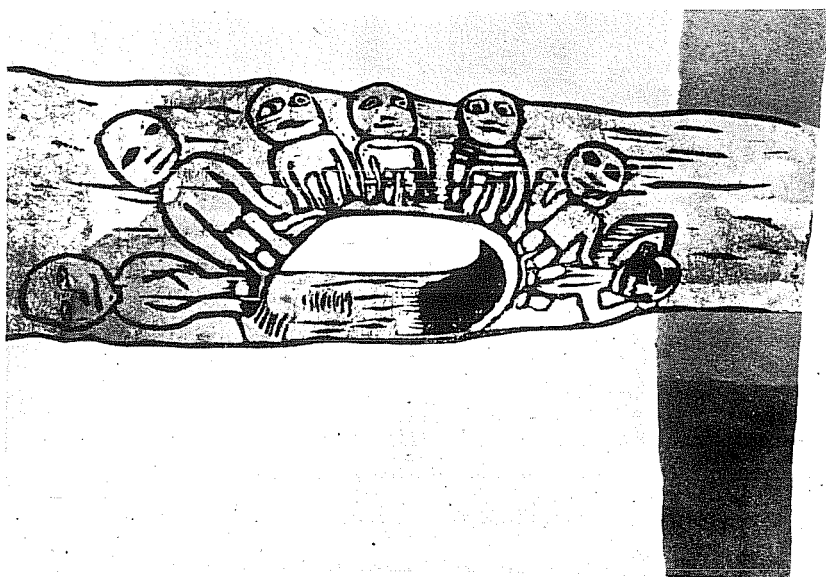


Leonardo da Vinci in his note books says he was intrigued with the images he could discover in cloud formations and walls; he exercised a form of visual imagination. I had a somewhat similar experience when I discovered Glooscap's profile in a monoprint I created. From the hundreds of monoprints I prepare, I choose and select very carefully and try to use my visual imagination. Since I was struggling with the problem of creating an image for Glooscap, I did not know what form he would take, but when I saw a profile appearing in the grey/brown monoprint, all I had to do was follow the outline. I knew instantly that this would be the Glooscap, that mythical lord and creator of the Micmacs I was looking for. According to an Indian tradition, he had a rock-like face with moss in his hair. I then added the green leaves symbolizing the moss in his hair.



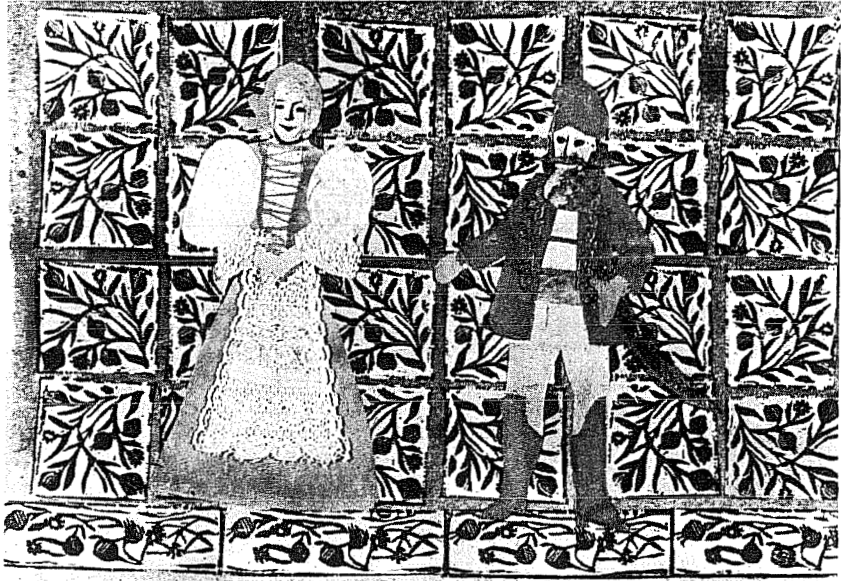
A similar experience was the creation of an illustration for an Eskimo poem entitled "Eskimo Chant" in *The Wind Has Wings*. Very little had to be added to complete this picture.

In *How Summer Came to Canada* I introduced pine needles, cedar twigs, green plants and potato prints into my compositions. In *The Mountain Goats of Temlaham* I used linoleum cuts to add impact to the developing scenes.

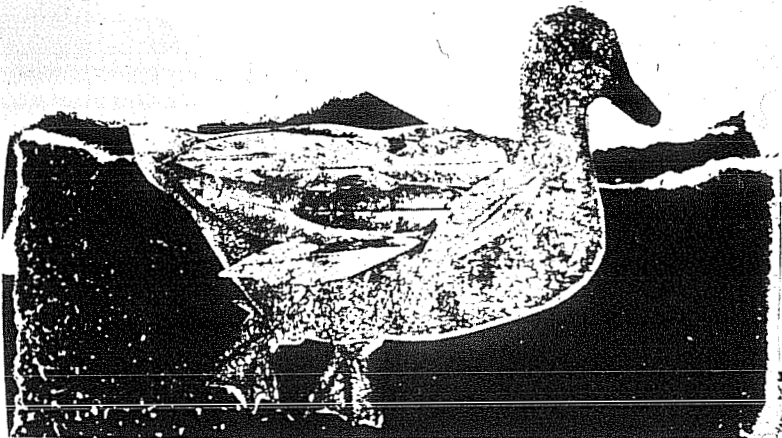


In *The Miraculous Hind* I have used linoleum cuts and have introduced lace into the aprons of the women's costumes. I also used cut-out words

as images so that children should feel and see that there is beauty in the sound and look of words. There are words that seem to merge into the background. When the cut-out words cannot do justice any more to the ideas in them, at that moment they become pictures themselves. Words become images — the two become one.



In *Canadian Wonder Tales* it was a challenge to be limited to work in black and white. Besides linoleum cuts and drawing with pentels [see *CCL* cover], I have introduced collagraphs. The term collagraph is derived from collage. It is a collage composition that is glued to a surface from which a textural print is taken. Or, the images from a collage composition are inked up and printed separately to form a new composition.

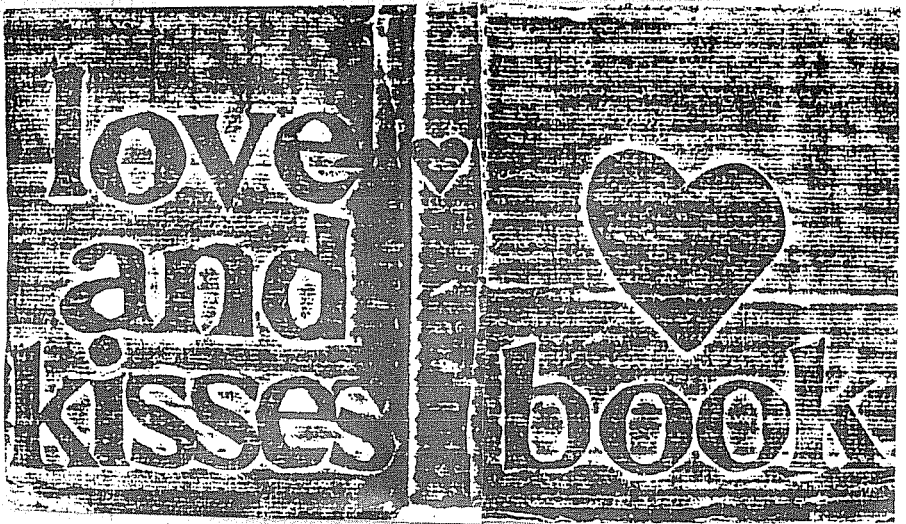


The following picture is from a new book entitled *The Witch of the North* (Oberon Press, 1975) containing nine stories from French Canada. The stories were collected and translated from the French into modern English by Mary Alice Downie.



My work is a result of my ideas as an artist and is subject to change as my experience changes and grows. In the past few years I have come to develop ideas that do not lend themselves to commercial publishing. I do not feel that the shape of a book should be limited to single leaves bound together. I feel that there are many other forms it might take; for example, exploring the different materials to print on, such as corrugated cardboard. Other variables are the size or the shape of the book. Certain shapes suggest certain ideas or certain ideas may suggest different shapes, for example, as in the *Carousel Book* on which I am presently working. I intend to experiment and produce books with different shapes; for instance, I am working on a *Heartless Book* and a *Heart Book*, as well as the *Carousel Book*.

I feel that the ideas, the content I wish to express within my books, can be well expressed in the physically unusual books that I plan to produce. As a result I have begun a modest publishing operation of my own called The Melville Press. My first limited edition book to appear is entitled *Love and Kisses Heart Book*. This edition is limited to 110 copies. Each copy contains sixteen separately printed pages, two colours to a page, using seven colours in all, including portfolio covers; and the whole is tied with cord. The paper used is single and double-faced corrugated board for pages and cover. Each page was cut to 13 1/2 x 17 inches and scored. The silkscreen prints have been printed by Ronald Perrault at Les Ateliers Arachel in Montreal.



As for film, in 1971 the National Film Board invited me to submit a story for a filmstrip that would introduce the culture of Canada's various ethnic groups to Canadian children. After much research and thought I decided to work on the Hungarian legend of the Miraculous Hind. I found it had universal appeal and possessed the pictorial qualities necessary for an effective visual presentation. In 1973 I adapted this filmstrip to a 64-page picture book which was published by Holt, Rinehart & Winston of Canada Ltd. Irene Aubrey, who is presently the Children's Literature Librarian/Consultant at the National Library in Ottawa, did the French translation. Dr. Veronika Gervers of the Royal Ontario Museum wrote the scholarly end-piece. She describes in detail the early history of the Hungarians, the history of the Miraculous Hind, and the meaning that the figures of the legend possess. I worked closely at the beginning with Veronika developing and discussing ideas, and it was our mutual friendship and enthusiasm that sparked off many beautiful ideas.

Research was a very important part of this work. It was necessary to read and study painting, drawings, engravings, photographs and contemporary representations of original ethnographic material housed in the Royal Ontario Museum since this legend originated 1500 years ago. Because it was difficult to reconstruct the ancient Hungarian costumes, the figures of the legend are dressed in costumes now considered typical of the traditional Hungarian dress. The main characters wear the traditional dress characteristic of the Hungarian nobility between the 16th and 18th centuries. The remaining figures, the horsemen, the maidens and the bard are dressed in traditional regional Hungarian costumes. [To end, the filmstrip, "The Miraculous Hind", was shown with musical accompaniment and was followed by questions].