Pop-Up! The Magical World of Movable Books

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Selections from the Collection of Bernard S. Shapiro

Pop-Ups on Parade: Art, Novelty, and the Book Reimagined

By Leonard S. Marcus

Pop-ups—most familiar today as a novelty subgenre of the children’s trade book—gamely realize two of Western art’s classic ambitions. They catapult flat pictorial space into the third dimension, and make still images stir with life. For children, collectors, and anyone else who falls under their spell, the pop-up experience is tabletop theater at its most beguiling—total immersion in a miniature world that, like the shadow-boxes of Joseph Cornell, sanctions daydreaming, demands close inspection, and in the end keeps some of its secrets to itself.


Books with movable elements of one kind or another have a long and surprising history. The earliest known examples date from the fourteenth century and were intended as instructional aids for adults steeped in the arcana of anatomy, astronomy, theology, and other learned pursuits. Euclid’s The Elements of Geometrie (1570) featured three-dimensional illustrations of complex theorems. Nineteenth-century manuals for carpenters and landscape architects came with built-in pop-up demonstration models. Victorian advertisers harnessed dramatic pop-up special effects for their particular purposes; present-day artist book makers Red Grooms and Kara Walker have done so for theirs.
From the late nineteenth-century onward, however, children’s-book illustrators have held sway as the pop-up’s principal interpreters, generating an abundance of commercially viable work of sometimes astonishing vivacity and technical flair. Across industrialized Europe and the United States, a juvenile gift-book market established itself in tandem with the literate middle class. Parents who wished to indulge their children might choose a storybook lavishly illustrated by Arthur Rackham or Edmund Dulac, or a “movable” that cleverly blended attributes of a book and toy.

The first creative genius to work in the latter vein was the Munich-based illustrator Lothar Meggendorfer (1847-1925), whose robust depictions of comic characters, and the waggish pratfalls he devised for them, anticipated the slapstick antics of Charlie Chaplin. Meggendorfer, like his contemporary Thomas Edison, exploited mechanical means to arrive at a new art of the moving image. His masterpiece, the six-paneled *International Circus* (1887; 1979) remains a wondrous spectacle; we can only imagine how it must have thrilled young audiences in the pre-motion-picture days of its first appearance.

After 1900, America’s vast network of Carnegie-endowed public libraries institutionalized a major segment of the juvenile market, with high-minded librarians setting collection standards that typically excluded toy-like novelties from consideration. Pop-ups, in the U.S., thereafter became the province of decidedly down-market publishing firms. One such company, Blue Ribbon Pleasure Books, is credited with having invented the term “pop-up”—a notable advance over the more awkward “bookano” (book + Meccano toy) floated in Britain in the 1920s. During the Great Depression years, Blue Ribbon’s popular low-priced movables featured *Terry and the Pirates* and other characters pulled straight from the Sunday funny papers—another librarian bugaboo.
The mass appeal of such books was undeniable, as Vojtěch Kubašta (1914-1992), an enterprising Prague designer-illustrator was again to prove. Trained as an architect but intent on a career in art, Kubašta honed his craft on 3-D advertising cards and Christmas crèches before approaching Artia, a state-run Czech publishing firm, with a pop-up *Little Red Riding Hood*. The exuberantly painted fairytale and its sequels must have seemed harmless enough to Soviet-era authorities. In any case, Kubašta’s most productive period—the 1950s and 1960s - coincided with the first great upsurge in international children’s-book publishing. Marketed globally by England’s Bancroft & Co., more than thirty-five million copies of Kubašta’s books were sold worldwide, in twenty-four languages.

The rampant inflation of the 1970s gutted American libraries’ purchasing power, prompting even the most prestigious juvenile publishers to refocus their resources in part on visually striking books with adult retail “cross-over” appeal. As the American designer turned book-packager/publisher Waldo Hunt (1920-2009) was quick to recognize, pop-ups fit the bill perfectly—provided that a cheap enough labor force could be found to assemble the books by hand. The first pop-ups originated by Hunt’s company, Intervisual Books, were manufactured in Japan and Cali, Colombia. Later, Tijuana, Mexico became pop-up central. Today nearly all such books are hand-assembled in Mainland China. Among the early Intervisual successes were several reissues of classics by Lothar Meggendorfer and his more sentimental contemporary, Ernest Nister--and a pop-up original that stunned the book world when Jan Pieńkowski’s *Haunted House* (1979) won Britain’s most prestigious illustration prize, the Kate Greenaway Medal.
By then, responsibility for the increasingly complex hidden clockworks of a pop-up’s animating levers and gears was becoming the domain of specialists called “paper engineers.” Today these artisan-wizards work in league with the illustrator in a relationship that closely parallels that between an artist and a master printer.

The demand for ever-more brilliantly imagined movables continues unabated, and is met by an international corps of artists led by Pieńkowski’s (Polish-born British); David Pelham (British); Robert Sabuda, Matthew Reinhart, David A. Carter, and Paul O. Zelinsky (American); and Kees Moerbeek (Dutch). At a time when the advent of new technologies has raised urgent questions about the future of the traditional print-on-paper book, these artists have made the pop-up their mad scientist’s laboratory for unlocking the secrets of the codex format’s cinematic, theatrical, and sculptural potential. Whatever pops up next may well be a sign of things to come for the illustrated book generally, and the graphic arts that support it.
Bernard S. Shapiro (1917-2009) was a Boston-based entrepreneur with many interests who formed the collection over a period of some twenty years. The collection numbers over 250 books of which sixty-six were originally shown at the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, MA in the winter of 2012. IPCNY has selected seventeen from the children’s book portion of the collection for presentation here.

Leonard S. Marcus is one of the world’s leading authorities on children’s books and their illustration. The author of more than twenty books, Mr. Marcus is a frequent contributor to the New York Times Book Review and is a founding trustee of the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art. He is currently curating the New York Public Library’s major exhibition for 2013, opening on June 7th.

International Print Center New York is a non-profit institution founded to promote the greater appreciation and understanding of the fine art print worldwide. Through innovative programming, it fosters a climate for the enjoyment, examination and serious study of artists’ prints—from the old master to the contemporary. IPCNY nurtures the growth of new audiences for the visual arts while serving the print community through exhibitions, publications, educational programs and other services. For membership information, please contact Stephanie Trejo, Administrator, at Stephanie@ipcny.org.

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Pop-Up! is available for touring through IPCNY’s Exhibitions Touring Program; for information, please contact Lotte Marie Allen, Exhibitions Coordinator, at lotte@ipcny.org.