

Touching Art: The Art Museum as a Picture Book, and the Picture Book as Art

Perry Nodelman. University of Winnipeg, Canada. perry.nodelman@icloud.com

Abstract

Based on a keynote address delivered at the 2017 *Child and the Book* conference in Valencia on interdisciplinary links between children's literature and the arts, this essay draws on its author's experience first as a children's literature scholar focused on picture books and then as a volunteer guide and docent for school tours in art museums. It explores how visits to art museums might be enriched by thinking about the art in them in the ways in which we think about the art in children's picture books- as images illuminated by a context of nearby images and the verbal language they appear in connection with. After an exploration of common assumptions about how to look at art in museums and a consideration of the ways in which our knowledge of picture books might influence our interactions with that art, the essay also briefly considers how museum art might influence our understanding and appreciation of picture books.

Key words: art, picture books, museums, galleries, context.

Resumen

Basado en la conferencia plenaria pronunciada en 2017 en el congreso en Valencia *The Child and the Book* sobre vínculos interdisciplinarios entre la literatura infantil y las artes, este artículo utiliza la experiencia del autor como guía voluntario y docente para visitas escolares a museos artísticos. Explora cómo las visitas a museos de arte pueden ser enriquecidas pensando acerca del arte que contienen de la manera en la que pensamos sobre el arte en los álbumes para niños y niñas – como imágenes iluminadas por un contexto de imágenes cercanas y por el lenguaje verbal que aparece en conexión con ellas. Tras una exploración de las asunciones habituales sobre cómo mirar el arte en los museos y una consideración sobre las maneras en las que nuestro conocimiento de los álbumes puede influir nuestras interacciones sobre este arte, el ensayo considera también brevemente cómo el arte de los museos puede influir nuestra comprensión y apreciación de los álbumes.

Palabras clave: arte, álbumes, museos, galerías, contexto.

Resum

Basat en la conferència plenària pronunciada el 2017 al congrés a València *The Child and the Book* sobre vincles interdisciplinaris entre la literatura infantil i les arts, aquest article utilitza l'experiència de l'autor com a guia voluntari i com a docent per a visites escolars a museus artístics. Explora com les visites a museus d'art poden ser enriquides tot pensant sobre l'art que hi contenen de la manera en la que pensem sobre l'art en els àlbums per a infants – com a imatges il·luminades per un context d'imatges properes i pel llenguatge verbal que apareix en connexió amb elles. Després d'una exploració de les assumpcions habituals sobre com mirar l'art als museus i una consideració sobre les maneres en les quals el nostre coneixement dels àlbums pot influir les nostres interaccions sobre aquest art, l'assaig considera també breument com l'art dels museus pot influir la nostra comprensió i apreciació dels àlbums.

Paraules clau: art, àlbums, museus, galeries, context.

I'll start with two pictures. I encountered the first- a watercolour painting by the nineteenth century British artist William Heath depicting a sea battle between the American ship Chesapeake and the British ship Shannon in 1813- in the museum where I volunteer as a guide, the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. The second picture, a two- page spread from Maurice Sendak's (1963) celebrated children's picture book *Where the Wild Things Are*, depicts the wild things and their new friend Max cavorting in what the text identifies as a "wild rumpus." These pictures have nothing obvious to do with each other. But when I first saw Heath's watercolour, I immediately thought of Sendak's rumpus. I was looking at a painting of an early nineteenth century battle hanging on the wall of an art museum, and thinking about a picture book for children published a century and a half later. Nor is this eccentric behaviour unusual for me. I often find myself looking at art in museums and thinking about picture books.



Figure 1: The boarding and taking of the American frigate "Chesapeake" by HM Frigate "Shannon", 1st June 1813. William Heath



Figure 2: *Where the Wild Things Are*. Maurice Sendak

The reason for that is simple: I know a fair amount about picture books and much less about other kinds of art. Furthermore, much of what I know about art I learned in the process of trying to learn more about picture books. Before I began to teach children's literature courses some decades ago, I was a literature scholar. While I knew quite a bit about novels and poems that I could apply to ones written for children, picture books were something of a mystery to me. I enjoyed looking at them and reading them, but I didn't know what to say about them. And I soon discovered that published writing about them was not all that much help. Most of it focused on sharing the books with children without much consideration of what the books themselves were or how they communicated. It was simply taken for granted that pictures were attractive enough to engage children and thus, helped them to understand what the words were saying. So I began to look elsewhere for help in understanding what the pictures did actually do in order to engage their audiences. I found useful ideas in a variety of places: in discussions of the psychology of pictorial perception; in scholarly descriptions of how paintings, photographs, and films communicate; in theories of illustration and histories of illustrated books; and especially in analyses of the semiotics or meaningful codes of visual imagery. The result of all that was my book *Words About Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books* (Nodelman, 1988). But there was a side effect: having learned about how visual art works in order to understand picture books, I tend to understand all visual art as if it was picture books.

I suspect I am not alone in doing so. The children I know- including the ones I accompany on their visits to art museums- have usually experienced a lot of picture books before they actually get around to looking at paintings and sculptures in a museum. Their classroom, and often their homes, contain many picture books. Some of these children also make frequent visits to the

public library and see yet more of them. But most children make far fewer visits to art museums. Many of the students who come to the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia on school tours are having their first visit to an art museum. It seems likely, then, that their experience of all these picture books, like my own, operates as a context for how they look at and make sense of paintings. What I want to explore now is whether or not it's a useful context, a helpful one.

The most obvious difference between paintings in a museum and illustrations in a picture book emerge from how their viewers are expected to interact with them. Most obviously, picture books are books. You can get something out of them only by holding them, or at the very least, looking at them while someone else holds them for you. In a museum, however, as we guides and docents constantly remind people at the beginning of tours, there is one key rule: do not touch the art. It is, of course, a very practical rule. Pictures are easily damaged by the oils in our skin, if not by overenthusiastic poking and pointing.

Books, though, are meant to be touched. On his website, the American pop-up book artist David Carter (n.d.) says, "I hope my art tickles your mind and remember to please touch the art." And indeed, Carter's books are made to be touched- touched quite gently, certainly, for even though there are wheels to turn and levers to pull, these complex abstract paper structures are easily torn- but nevertheless, touched. Touchable.

Touchable, furthermore by both children and adults. In an essay about how the differing shapes, sizes, formats, and word/picture relationships of comics or graphic novels and picture books work to influence the ways in which they are read, Joe Sutcliff Saunders (2013) makes use of the concept of a reading "chaperone," that is, a supervisor of the reading experience: "in general, if the book anticipates a solitary reader who chaperones the words as they go about their work of fixing the meaning of the images, that book is a comic; if the book instead anticipates a reader who chaperones the words as they are communicated to a listening reader, that book is a picture book" (61). In other words, in offering both pictures youngsters can look at and a text they might not be able to read, picture books imply audiences consisting of adult readers sharing the text with younger listener/viewers: holding the book, and often, at the same time, holding the child. Picture books invite an intimate experience of contact and connection. A touching experience.

But museum art is untouchable, and not just because of the harmful effect of skin oils on oil paint. It also has something to do with the specialness of the art- its existence as something unique and therefore somehow sacred, demanding our admiration and even our awe. There is something magical about the fact that any one particular combination of canvas and paint that

hangs in a museum was once touched by its artist, actually brought into existence by its creator's hands. Touched by those hands although not to be touched.

There are, of course, many copies of the images that hang on the walls of museums- much as there are many copies of the original images of wild things that Sendak produced. There are literally millions of copies of well- known paintings like da Vinci's Mona Lisa, in books and on websites and postcards and tea towels. But the existence of all these reproductions does not undermine the special significance of the original they reproduce, the unique painting once touched by da Vinci that hangs in the Louvre- a significance unlike the originals of picture book illustrations, which are significant primarily as works made exactly in order to be reproduced. John Berger (1972) once famously suggested that the existence of numerous reproductions of famous paintings since the development of photography changed the way we think of the originals:

In a gallery or a museum, indeed, many viewers believe that they are expected to somehow become the viewer the painting demands- a characterless worshipper at the altar of art. Who they are themselves or what they actually see or feel or think couldn't possibly matter less, except insofar as it is a worshipful response to the art.

The uniqueness of the original now lies in it being the original of a reproduction, it is no longer what its image shows that strikes one as unique; its first meaning is no longer to be found in what it says, but in what it is It is defined as an object whose value depends upon its rarity. This value is affirmed and gauged by the price it fetches on the market. But because it is nevertheless "a work of art"- and art is thought to be greater than commerce- its market price is said to be a reflection of its spiritual value the art object, the 'work of art', is enveloped in an atmosphere of entirely bogus religiosity. (Berger, 21)

From that point of view, Heath's watercolour represents 23,750 British pounds worth of bogus religiosity- the price the Nova Scotia museum paid for it in an auction at Christie's in 2015. And that amount pales in comparison to, say, the \$110.5 million US earned by an untitled painting by Jean Michel Basquiat in May, 2017, or the \$170.4 million US earned by Modigliani's *Reclining Nude*, 1917- 18) in 2015, or the \$450 million US earned by Da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi* in November, 2017.

Many people believe that something worth that many millions is special enough, sacred enough, to require nothing but reverent contemplative awe. For them, a museum is something like a

monastery and the pictures hanging in it invite anything but a dialogue. If the pictures are worth coming to visit in the museum, then they are complete as they are without any real need for visitors to interact with them or interpret them or even to think about them at all. They required nothing of their viewers but the total absorption in them they cry out for. Exploring the question of whom he creates his books for, the children's illustrator Shaun Tan (n.d.) observes that, "when I paint pictures for gallery exhibitions, I am never asked *who* I am painting for". In a gallery or a museum, indeed, many viewers believe that they are expected to somehow become the viewer the painting demands- a characterless worshipper at the altar of art. Who they are themselves or what they actually see or feel or think couldn't possibly matter less, except insofar as it is a worshipful response to the art.

In a recent article in *The Guardian* newspaper, the art critic Jonathan Jones (2017) sums up this attitude nicely. While claiming to be upset by smartphone apps that offer guides to painting, he actually expresses disdain for any and all attempts to explain art, all of which explain away its religious magic:

The idea that in order to appreciate a work of art you need to be spoonfed amazing facts about it is erroneous and slightly pathetic. Our first experience of a painting, sculpture or installation should be raw, unguided, wild and a bit baffling, like following a path in the woods. Later, you might like to do some research, which can deepen your enjoyment. Yet it is best done away from the art, so that even when you return, the work still feels fresh.

The shock of the unknown is the most precious thing art can give us . . . Without being told anything, we can intuit and feel its significance, often without being able to put that response into words. (n.p.)

We can? All of us? Always? Or those of us who can't or often don't- like, for instance me: does that make us into unfeeling dummies? Are we being insulted?

In an online blog, Ralph Ammer (2017) suggests a related but quite different or even opposite assumption: the idea that paintings speak to each of their viewers as individuals, that everyone always sees them differently from everybody else, that they mean whatever you yourself see them as meaning:

What you think or feel about a piece of art is nobody's business but yours.

And that is the beauty of it! Great pieces of art evoke a multitude of emotional and intellectual reactions. So if your thoughts or emotions differ from other people's, that is perfectly fine!

If I told you what to think about a piece of art, this might "destroy" your contribution. I would cut you off from your personal experience by reducing the artwork to a singular viewpoint. (n.p.)

This apparently less elevating view of what a painting does nevertheless requires the same faith in its magic uniqueness, here understood as its ability to be endlessly evocative, endlessly meaningful in a myriad of ways. Unlike, other forms of communication, unlike, say, a stop sign or a perfume ad in a magazine- or a children's picture book- it remains uniquely itself by allowing and indeed existing exactly in order to elicit a range of different understandings. It is a communication that communicates nothing specific because it is capable of communicating anything and everything.

Viewed in this way, the pictures in museums are directly opposite to the ones in picture books. True, viewers, are free to interpret the picture- book pictures in any way they choose- but only if they ignore the texts that accompany them. For instance, I can look at the picture of an automobile topped with a load of luggage and surrounded by dark woods in a picture book by Francesca Sanna and imagine this text: "After a long day passing through beautiful mountain scenery, we finally reached the campground." Or this text: "Suddenly a whole bunch of boxes landed on top of the car, nearly crushing us." Or even, possibly, this text: "Suddenly, on the highway before us, there was an army of huge wild things emerging from the trees, rolling their terribly eyes and gnashing their terrible teeth." But the actual text- "We leave at night to avoid being seen"- and the context provided by the book's title, *The Journey*, and the previous sequence of events provided by earlier pictures and texts invite readers to understand it as the beginning of a family's flight from a war- torn land. The pictures of pictures books are incomplete without each other, and without the texts that accompany each and all of them. In their unique specialness, apparently, the pictures in museums require no such context.



Figure 4: *The Journey*. Francesca Sanna

Or do they? They are, after all, hung in a museum, a circumstance that, as the pseudo- religious views I've been describing paradoxically suggest, implies a specific attitude towards them. You need the context of the frame around it and the building it hangs in to understand the kind of awestruck devotion a painting requires. Note, for instance, how *Mona Lisa* out of a museum, outside a frame, and reproduced on myriad items like wine bottles and toilet paper ceases to be sacred- or, perhaps, is the basis of a satiric joke about its presumed sacredness. Whether it's a sacred object or not, the mere fact of a picture being hung in a museum implies that it requires specific ways of being looked at and understood.

As well as being itself a context for a painting inside it, a museum contains further contexts. As Berger (1972) suggests, "The meaning of an image is changed according to what one sees immediately beside it or what comes immediately after it. Such authority as it retains, is distributed over the whole context in which it appears" (29). That context- where pictures are hung, how the floor plan of the galleries invites viewers to move through them- makes each picture part of a larger text, a larger story- much as the text of a picture book contextualizes and shapes responses to the pictures included in it.

Museums also provide words to accompany their pictures. There are often signs announcing the names of specific exhibits or the contents of specific galleries, and they inevitably affect how viewers understand the individual works they label as being a cohesive group. And then there are didactic labels- texts that provide information about each painting and sometimes offer explanations of it. While separate from the works themselves, the labels do claim a certain authority, invite viewers to understand the art in relation to the information the label provides.

Didactic labels also often provide titles, texts that the artists themselves have attached to their work. The combination of picture and didactic becomes something like a mini picture book hanging on a wall, with a written text throwing light on and changing our perception of an image, and vice-versa.

Yet more words shape responses beyond the physical space of the museum. For special exhibits, there are often catalogues giving detailed description of the works, how to understand them, and how they relate to other works by other artists and to the entire history of art. There are, for that matter, all the words to be found in books and magazines and on the internet about myriad artists and many traditions of visual expression, all of which might be and often are taken to be contexts for an individual piece. All these many words have relationships to individual paintings that, once we know the words, inevitably work to shape and, I believe, more often than not enrich our response to the paintings.

For that matter, paintings themselves already represent responses to all that language, all those contexts. For W.J.T. Mitchell (1994), verbal texts “are already inside the image, perhaps most deeply when they seem to be most completely absent, invisible, and inaudible” (98). His examples are the complex theoretical texts, historical responses, and philosophical speculations that led to apparently very simple pictures by modernist artists like Kazimir Malevich- abstract pictures of geometric shapes on white backgrounds that are apparently devoid of narrative or thematic content- and the even more complex discourse that represent what some observers believe such pictures signify. Consider, for instance, this comment on Malevich’s work from a New Yorker magazine article:

What spilled out by itself from his wrist, impulsively and with inspiration was recognized as a fundamental achievement of theory, the apex of accomplishment- a discovery of that critical, mysterious, coveted point after which, because of which, and beyond which nothing exists and nothing can exist (Tolstoya, 2015).

I have no idea what that means, but it certainly makes the painting in question seem deeply complex and undeniably profound.

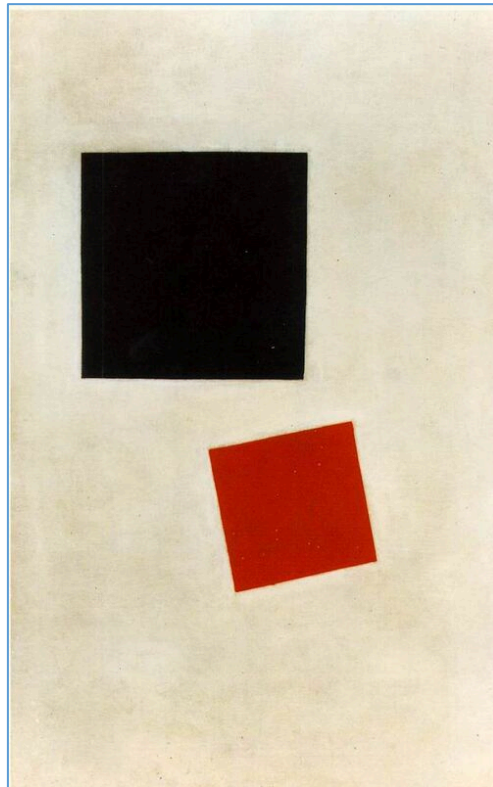


Figure 3: Black Square and Red Square. Kazimir Malevich

I'd wager, furthermore, that few viewers without knowledge of this sort discourse intuit all that much of it from their observation of a painting, or have individual responses to paintings that are as complex and thoughtful- which explains why so many museum visitors in front of such works happily claim that they could have easily painted them themselves, so what's the big deal? The art exists firmly inside its verbal context- for those who know that context. And knowing at least some of it makes the experience of museum- going far more rewarding.

Finally, then, the entire experience of museum- going and of viewing and thinking about art in general seems to be a matter of transforming the individual images into specific illustrations that form part of a larger text, a larger story: the story museums believe they need didactic panels- and guides and docents- to help tell. Arthur Danto (1992) once famously spoke about what he called the "artworld": "To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry- an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld" (431). As branch offices of the artworld and providers of its discourses, museums make the experience of museum- going a lot like enjoying a picture book.

If they do, then all that religiosity about the reverence and awe with which we are supposed to view art in museums really is bogus. According to David Lewis (2001), in picture books, "the words are never just words, they are always words- as- influenced- by- pictures. Similarly, the

pictures are never just pictures, they are pictures- as- influenced- by- words” (74). I believe the same is true of the pictures in museums. They are caught up in, best explained by, and most enjoyable in relation to a context of verbal language.

But after beginning to guide school tours at an art museum led me to explore what I could learn about art education, I discovered that many art educators would be unlikely to agree with that simple proposition- that, in fact, their ideas about interactions with art focus on the same two themes I mentioned earlier. First, art is sacred, magical, mystical. You come to a museum to have a transformative experience, to be awed by it- like going to church. A docent’s job is to encourage and value such awe. Second, art invites awe because it effects everyone differently. Everyone has a different response, and all responses are equally valid. A docent’s job is to value each and every response of each and every museum- goer equally.

Picture books about visits to museums reinforce both these attitudes. In Jacqueline Preiss Weitzman and Robin Preiss Glasser’s *You Can’t Take a Balloon into the Metropolitan Museum*, for instance, a girl and an older woman who might be her grandmother spent most of the time in the museum simply standing in awe in front of various works of art- selections from the Met’s collection. Meanwhile, the girl’s balloon, left on a railing outside but untied by a bird, floats through the city pursued by an increasingly larger number of people, creating slapstick havoc that mirrors the appearance of the specific paintings the girl is looking at as the images switch back and forth between what is happening inside and outside the museum. One one occasion the girl does imitate the pose of a sculpture; but usually, her staid and apparently distant contemplation of the art and the eventual fatigue it causes her provide a stark contrast with the fun of the comical events outside. The book never suggests that reverential awe of art is the wrong way to look at it; but perhaps unintentionally, it does suggest that looking at it in this one apparently correct way is much less enjoyable than real experiences outside the museum away from art. The balloon has a far more entertaining afternoon than its owner.

Elisa Gutierrez’s *Picturescape* (2007), a picture book that describes one boy’s trip to an art museum, sums up the second attitude. All the paintings in this museum are well- known Canadian ones, such as Emily Carr’s *Big Raven*, a picture which focuses on an image of the bird as depicted in the style of the traditional art of the Canadian West- coast Haida nation, and which is often understood in relation to complex attitudes to the Canadian landscape, to what Canadian art might be, and to the beliefs and values of Canada’s indigenous people. But as the wordless text of Gutierrez’s book implies, all this boy sees is something he can imagine *himself* doing. The pictures show him entering this painting and then all the others in the book. He makes

them so much his own that their history and artistic contexts fade from significance. The paintings are wonderful, it seems, only because they allow such intensely personal responses. While this boy clearly has fun in the museum by seeing himself and nothing but himself in the art, he misses much of interest and value—as will young readers who learn to share his faith in the wonderfulness of one-sidedly personal responses.

Both these ideas about looking at art are attitudes I know well from my years of teaching university literature courses, except there they were applied to literary texts. The first idea- that you study literature purely to learn about the greatness of great writers- - was common in the early years of my professorial career. It often prevented students from an actual engagement between themselves and a text, either because they thought they could just believe in a work's greatness, claim to be awed by it, and not think any further about it; or because they could modestly plead an inability to come to grips with its greatness, not be awed by it, and not think any further about it; or because they could take their blindness to the greatness as a sign of the foolishness of silly poets and pretentious English professors and just dismiss studying it altogether. The second attitude- we all respond differently- grew stronger as my years of teaching continued, and prevents an actual engagement with a text by implying there is no need for one, since a text means whatever you choose to say you think it means- or in other words, only what you already knew before you interact with it. There is no point, then, in talking about it or studying it- you already know what matters about it, so why bother?

I had a strong sense that the commitment of some of the art educators I was encountering to

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similar ideas was likely to have the same negative effect: prevent real engagements with the art, real contact with whatever was unique or new or potentially transformative in it, real dialogues with it and about it. How then, to encourage real engagements and more dialogue? Well, I'd chosen to volunteer at a museum guide because I did sort of know something about art- about the art of pictures books, to be sure, but picture books are a form of art, right? And then it hit me. Yes, pictures books were indeed art. And they were art because the art in museums, surely, was a lot like picture books.

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that- the fact that you could touch them signalled their approachability, their invitation for readers to interact with them and involve themselves in them. They required involvement because they were a sort of puzzle, the puzzle being, what does the picture show you and how does it relate to what the words tell you? What's the story, and how can I find out more about the characters and situation in the pictures than the text tells me, and more about the significance of what's happening than the pictures show me? And often, when you do find out more about them, the reward is not just more information or more insight into the story the book is telling, but also, an intriguing experience in itself. This sort of knowledgeable puzzle-solving can be pleasurable to people of all ages, including very young children. I know for instance, that children and adults who are aware of *Mona Lisa* and of the long European history of paintings of the Madonna and her child have more to enjoy in Anthony Browne's picture in his book *Willy's Pictures* (1999) of a gorilla posed as *Mona Lisa* and holding an infant than ones who are not.

Picture books invite you to look closely at them and to be open to a myriad of pleasurable ways in which their images might complicate the meanings of their texts and vice-versa- how the pictures and the words become enriching contexts for each other. Picture books can and often do suck you in. In a recent interview on the *Seven Impossible Things Before Breakfast* blog, the illustrator James Serafino (2017) says something that sums up their ability to engage:

Picture books create meaning and connection that last a lifetime. They shape us more than we can know. There is no more powerful art experience than story time with your child. It is more important than any painting in any museum. I've stood in awe of the Sistine Chapel; I'd rather be in bed with a book.

But what would happen if we went to the Sistine Chapel without the conviction that we ought to be awed? What if we looked at as if it were a picture book? It does sort of look like a picture book- or perhaps a graphic novel with a number of frames showing different events in the same story on each page or surface. And, if you are aware of the context those frames relate to, it does tell a story- a lot of stories.

Michelangelo did not actually include the words that made his image part of a giant picture book. Either you have to know them already, or you have to read about them somewhere else, or a guide or a docent has to provide them. And once provided with them- once aware of the verbal context that allows a picture to tell a story and make it meaningful, you can get closer to the picture- not literally touch it, perhaps, but be intimately connected with it, have a

conversation with it and with the contexts it has conversations with. You can be touched by it- just as children and adults are often touched by the picture books they touch.

In other words, the more you are aware that art might offer the pleasures of picture books, the more you know of the meanings and connections it might be understood with, the more you might find yourself engaged in it. I know from sharing picture books with children and adults that being encouraged to notice visual details and asking questions about how to account for them- what stories they help to tell- is an enriching experience. Similarly, museum tours can be explorations in how art becomes meaningful in relation to the contexts you apply to it- being introduced to texts the might relate to it and being encouraged to think about how they might illuminate it- how to think about the implications of the information in didactic labels, how to see the paintings in a gallery in relation to each other, how to connect them to other texts not actually there in the museum- other paintings, which as a guide I often show them copies of on my iPad, and knowledge of art history and ideas about art in general- that might offer information not actually there in the museum.

Sometimes I introduce tours by saying “I am blue” and then asking what I might mean by that. People usually tell me it means that I’m sad. “But,” I say, “let’s assume there were two teams choosing sides in order to play football, the Reds and the Blues, and I said it then. Or, what if someone had played a trick on me by placing a can of paint on the top of the partially- open door I had just walked through, knocking over the paint can? Once I’ve introduced the idea that a different context can make something mean something different, I can go on to say that there is one context for the art they’re about to see that they know already- how they see it in terms of who they are and what they know already, like the boy in *Picturescape* who saw himself in Emily Carr’s painting. But now I’m going to try to help them to have a sense of some other possible contexts, like, for instance, looking at and thinking about how details in pictures can tell you things about how the artist wants you to understand the picture, about how the title might mean something, about how knowing about other works of art that relate to this one might matter. In other words, I show them how the museum is a sort of picture book, and the images in it like illustrations within it.

Heath’s watercolour of the boarding of the Chesapeake is a good example. The most obvious context for it is history. Its title refers to an important battle near Boston Harbour in the War of 1812. The Shannon’s victory and the subsequent towing of the Chesapeake to Halifax signalled the Nova Scotia city’s continuing importance as a centre of English naval power despite England’s loss of the American colonies in the War of Independence a few decades earlier. One

cannon each from the Shannon and the Chesapeake still stand now on the lawn surrounding Province House, home of the Nova Scotia provincial legislative assembly just across the street from the art museum I volunteer as a guide in. In the exhibit Heath's watercolour appeared in at the Gallery in 2016, a small display of a number of works that the Nova Scotia museum system had recently purchased in London at a Christie's auction of art of significance to early Canadian history, Heath's version of the battle was accompanied by no fewer than three other paintings of the Shannon and the Chesapeake.

But the other pictures are fairly distant views of the two ships. Heath's picture first attracted my attention because it offers a close-up of the action on board- moves beyond a journalistic report of the event to a sense of what it might be like to be there. And that was what reminded me of *Where the Wild Things Are*, and got me thinking of the painting in terms of picture books.

So why did it remind me of Sendak's wild rumpus? Most obviously, Heath's picture depicts a group of figures filling up a fairly confined space. And it creates a sense of lots of action, of many things happening all at the same time- a wild rumpus, figures moving in a variety of ways and looking in and pointing at a variety of directions, just as Sendak's wild things do. Sendak depicts some of the wild things with raised feet and arms, thus implying the inevitable movement from where the arms and legs were before they were raised and to where they will be after they inevitably come down again- a clever way of evoking their dance-like action of their procession. The upraised position of the many swords in Heath's picture similarly implies a movement that will continue- a thrust downwards- and therefore the damage they will cause in the next few moments. At least one person has already been wounded before this moment, seriously enough to fall to the deck. A number of people have the same look of anxious fear on their faces, suggesting that a lot more are likely to fall soon. A man on the right seems ready to give up the fight and leap overboard.

In both pictures, also, the figures are depicted as being quite close to the front of the space the perspective implies, so that the varied actions seem to be both constrained by and about to burst out of that space. There is tremendous energy in both pictures, an energy emphasized by the borders that constrain it.

In Heath's picture, also, no sword penetrates anything, and the style of the picture implies comedy rather than horror- just as Sendak's grotesquely clumsy monsters imply comedy in a way that diminishes the potential scariness of their monstrosity. Consider, for instance, the ways in which the expressions of Heath's Americans similarly reveal their shock- they are all equally and similarly astonished. The style implies an attitude to the events for viewers to share, a

pleasure in the comical plight of these theoretically dangerous enemies, much as the cartoon-like style of Sendak's image implies a lack of need for viewers to worry about the monstrosity of the supposedly wild things. And meanwhile, the heroic innocence of two outnumbered but bravely triumphant young heroes, one in each of the pictures, is emphasized both by their smiling lack of fear and their white good-guy outfits.

It's worth noting that while Heath focussed on military scenes like the Shannon picture in the early years of his career, he is better known for his later work as a political and social caricaturist—a kind of visual art that gives most pleasure to those who can understand the jokes because they know how they refer to their contexts outside the images—know the story they interact with and comment on. But similar narrative elements equally imply a story in far more serious paintings- in Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*, for instance, or in Picasso's *Guernica*.

Reading the style of visual images and the relationship of visual figures to each other as information about what story a picture tells are practices I first learned as I worked on writing my book *Words About Pictures* (Nodelman, 1988). I wanted to explore how picture help to tell stories, and I finally chose to give the book the subtitle "The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books." What I have come to understand since is the way in which all art is- or can be usefully and pleasurably perceived- as narrative art. What I learned from psychologists of pictorial perception about how the conventional associations of various colours or the visual weight of different figures in relation to each other or how the position of various figures in the middle or on the edges or at the top or bottom of a picture implies narrative- like relationships amongst them applies to all sorts of pictures- even ones as abstract as, say, Malevich's *Black Square and Red Square*, a painting which depicts exactly what its title describes, a black square positioned above a smaller red one on a field of white. As Mitchell (1994) suggests,

The relation of black square to red square is not just the relation between abstract opposites like stability and tilt, large and small, but of more potent, ideologically charged associations like deadly black and vivid, revolutionary red, domination and resistance, or even more personal and emotional relationships like father and son. (226).

Even this painting of simple shapes conveys and/or implies a narrative- becomes an illustration of an unspoken text that allows us to read it as something like an image in a picture book.

I rest my case, then. And having persuaded at least myself of the value of viewing the paintings in gallery in the context of how the pictures in picture books connect to their texts in order to

tell stories, I'll finish by saying a few words about the opposite possibility. What can art and the museum experience of it teach us about picture books?

Most obviously, to begin with: what I learned by reading art theory all those years ago when I put together *Words About Pictures* is obviously just as useful now as it was then. It provided me with a lot more words to think about than the ones already in the picture books themselves. But all those words- and for that matter most of the words I have been using here in this piece of writing- might distract us from one of the key facts about all pictures, the thing about them that leads directly to the discourse I have been critiquing about the separation of art from language.

Unlike the visual symbols that represent Japanese or English words in written texts, a painting like *Mona Lisa* contains shapes that do actually seem to look like people- to *resemble* them. As Mitchell (1994) says, "If writing is the medium of absence and artifice, the image is the medium of presence and nature, sometimes cozening us with illusion, sometimes with powerful recollection and sensory immediacy" (114). They can look like real things, and they are themselves real things, material objects with a physical presence for the museum-goers who stand near them. The language we relate to them- include the verbal texts we find in picture books- might lead us to lose contact with that presence, that immediacy. While I've suggested the trouble I have with it, considering the respect we pay to the powerful presence of visual images in museum settings might remind us of the similar power of the images in picture books- a power we tend to ignore as we allow ourselves to get caught up in the pictures as illustrations of texts, as parts of larger stories. We might well encourage ourselves and others to simply enjoy the pictures and their immediacy in and for themselves.

That means both attending to and honouring the magic of how the organizations of often very minimal lines and shapes and colours in picture books does indeed resemble people and things enough to evoke them for us, as do the simplified caricature of sailors in Heath's watercolour. But even more basic than that, it means being attentive to the sheer sensual delight of the lines and shapes and colours in and for themselves- the delightful redness of a red shape even before and beyond our recognition that it represents a ball or a hat or even just a square, for whatever it comes to represent it still offers the sensuous pleasure of its redness. According to the psychoanalytical theorist Julia Kristeva (1980), that remaining presence of that redness, of colours in and for themselves, represents a path to liberation from the constraint of being constructed as a specific kind of subject placed within specific cultural values: "it is through color- colors- that the subject escapes its alienation within a code (representational, ideological, symbolic and so forth) that it, as a conscious subject, accepts The chromatic apparatus, like

rhythm in language, thus involves a shattering of meaning and its subject into a scale of difference” (221). There is, surely, an undeniable and even liberating pleasure in just enjoying the colours of a picture for their own sake- enjoy the abstract- painting- like effect of the lively colours in picture books as well as the characters they help to depict and the situations they help to describe.

One final thing about picture books that we might learn from a consideration of museum art

For even more than the paintings in museums, the pictures in picture books are magical paradoxical, theoretically even impossible, both inextricably caught up in the network of words and meanings and triumphantly separate and different from that network, both inside language and outside it. We can both touch them and be touched by them.

emphasizes an unlikeness rather than a similarity: the fact that, unlike museum art, they are so eminently touchable.

We are happy when children hold them and carry them around, and even, sometimes, when they take them into the bath or chew on them, for there are many picture books designed exactly with those activities in mind. Readers of picture books can and do touch the art. Adults who care about and think about picture books might well remember their touchability more often- become more aware of their existence as material objects, of the ways in which they imply and invite, not only individual child readers hold them or even sleep with them, but also physical connections between children and adults- the sharing that the mere existence of books with pictures and texts for those who

cannot yet read imply. Their touchability is essential to what kind of art they are and what, kind of experience they invite and offer.

I suggested earlier that the physical presence of a painting in a gallery ought not to blind us to the ways in which it enters into the network of language and ideas that surround it- the ways in which it becomes an illustration of a range of texts. Now, I think, I want to offer the opposite warning about the pictures in picture books- to suggest that the ways in which they act as illustrations of the texts they accompany and the ways in which they refer to a range of contexts not blind us to the ways in which they retain their own physical presence, both as representational visual images and as touchable material objects. For even more than the paintings in museums, the pictures in picture books are magical paradoxical, theoretically even impossible, both inextricably caught up in the network of words and meanings and triumphantly separate and different from that network, both inside language and outside it. We can both touch them and be touched by them.

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