

Books and Beyond ...



For over sixty years Quentin Blake has been producing art. It all began when his first drawings were accepted for publication in *Punch*. He was just sixteen. At the age of twenty-eight he illustrated his first children's book, *A Drink of Water*, written by John Yeoman. Eight years later he created *Patrick*, his first children's picture story and, " ... it had to be in colour" he told me. Thirteen years later *Mister Magnolia* won the inaugural Children's Book Award, administered by the Federation of Children's Book Groups. Books have continued to flow from his studio in London and, to celebrate the Millennium, he produced a retrospective title *Quentin Blake: Words and Pictures* which detailed his artistic development.



Congratulations to our new Knight – Sir Quentin Blake – pictured in his London studio.

Recently published is *The Quentin Blake Treasury* containing a wonderful collection of his picture books, including old favourites *All Join In* and *Cockatoos*. His illustrations for the Roald Dahl stories began in 1990 and for many readers he will for ever be associated with Dahl – 'The Morecambe and Wise' of children's books. Their partnership was celebrated last year when the Royal Mail issued ten stamps with Quentin's illustrations from Dahl's books.

During his time as Children's Laureate (1999 - 2001) he was inspired to organise an exhibition where the works were hung in alphabetical order, which he stated "... would get rid of any sense of hierarchy between the old masters, modern painting and illustrations that I wanted to include." It was the National Gallery that positively responded to the idea and suggested that he should draw on the walls. As well as drawings in the gallery there were others at the entrance and all around the shop. Over the four months of that exhibition, *Tell Me A Picture*, a quarter of a million adults and children visited.

Four years later he spent almost the whole year working for the re-opening of the Petit Palais at the Musée de Beaux Arts in Paris. Walls were once again involved. He created modern day children and gave them wings so they could fly against the old masterpieces that were already in place and also

accompany the visitors around the museum. This was followed by an outside piece of work to hang on the scaffolding at St. Pancras Station in London during its refurbishment.

His book work continued but he became enthusiastic about moving in a completely different direction – experimenting beyond the page to walls in galleries, museums, hospitals and other public spaces. The *Magic Pencil* exhibition at the British Library was another development in that 'breaking out from books' desire. At this show we had those crayons for sale which draw in four different colours and we printed the words 'Magic Pencil' on the side. The pictures of the sky in *Angel Pavement* are drawn with such a crayon."

Following this, which wasn't simply Quentin's work but included more children's illustrators as well, another exhibition was arranged for Somerset House. "This would be a retrospective look at *Fifty Years of Illustration* and, indeed, that became the title," he told me, "and visitors walked through two wall hangings – enlargements of two facing pages from a book. Among the framed works hanging was a white drawing converted into a mural by being transferred to a white wall using the skill of a professional sign writer." This exhibition had a second showing at Aberdeen Art Gallery and that clever



technique came in useful later when Quentin was asked to decorate the walls of the Unicorn Theatre.

Quentin Blake at Christmas was on display at Dulwich Picture Gallery. "I was fortunate to follow on there from shows of the likes of Arthur Rackham and Beatrix Potter." Here, two of the rooms were very lofty and so allowed the opportunity for huge banners to be hung. My favourite was flying birds with balloons – full of movement, fun and colour.

Further opportunities to create large hanging banners came from the Kelvingrove Museum in Scotland. He included a reading tree and an acrobat family and told me, "Whatever situations my characters got in I could at least regard my pictures as unmistakably *on the wall!*"

Three years ago he was thrilled to be offered the chance to create more pictures that were not in a book format. He was asked by Cambridge University to produce a series of illustrations to celebrate its eight-hundredth anniversary. "Of course I said Yes! I wanted to try a sort of Bayeux Tapestry showing the University's history but, unfortunately, this became impractical." He compromised by producing a sequence of pictures featuring significant figures in the university's long history, including Milton, Newton and Byron. "The panorama – when it was drawn – existed in many varying sizes, of which the most important was about four feet high and seventy feet long." The work now has a permanent home in Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge.

This way of telling a story using the technology of reproduction prompted me to ask Quentin if new technology affected him or whether he uses it for his books. "Hardly at all," he replied. "I want to go on drawing as I always have with old-fashioned pens and pencils, brushes and crayons. But ... printing at-size projects, both indoors and out-of-doors, are 'off-the-page' adventures which are now perfectly possible for me to enjoy." The theatrical characters he was commissioned to create for the walls of the Unicorn Theatre is a lovely example of this. "From an enlarged transfer of the original drawing the pictures are sign-painted on the walls and thus are completely repeatable. The characters are all black and white except where they blossom out into cloaks, trousers and hats – all of extravagant colours."

During the past seven years Quentin has been involved in producing work for hospitals, both here and in France. "I was asked to create a series of pictures for the refurbishment of the Kersaw Ward for elderly residential patients in the South Kensington and Chelsea Mental Health Centre. I felt I was qualified as I was the same age as some of the patients!" (Quentin was eighty in 2012.) These pictures were very well received by patients and visitors alike. Encouraged by the positive reactions to them, he produced four more series. They took five years to complete and tackle complex subjects. *Planet Zog* began in 2007 and features aliens and young people



Characters displayed at The Unicorn Theatre

cheerfully swapping doctor and patient roles. "Going to hospital is rather like visiting an alien planet, so these drawings are not just for the patients at the Alexander Avenue reception centre in Harrow but for relatives and friends too."

Our Friends in the Circus was produced for Northwick Park Hospital and shows elderly people as jugglers, fire-eaters, tightrope walkers and clowns. These witty pictures are reflected in his book *Vive Nos Vieux Jours*, originally produced to cheer up his older, less mobile, French fans. This is now available here as *You're Only Young Twice* and makes a wonderful present for a special, more mature birthday celebration.

In the Vincent Square Eating Disorder Clinic in London we find another series of drawings, under the title *Ordinary Life*. They are a subtle celebration of day-to-day life, with characters doing seemingly mundane but pleasurable things like having a picnic or feeding the birds. "I wanted pictures that were relaxed and soft. They don't insist on food but food is there, as eating is part of everyday life."



From *Ordinary Life* for the Vincent Square Eating Disorder Clinic, London

There are over fifty pictures in the Centre Hospitalier Universitaire d'Angers in France. It's called *Mother and Babies Underwater* and was completed in 2011. Mothers and babies are swimming easily and free. "I drew them with a reed-pen, in Indian ink and coloured with watery, watercolour. They could be flying, there is such a joyous feeling of being released from labour. I would like to think that art in maternity wards will take off in England too, and in fact, Scarborough Hospital has taken nine," he enthused.

The exuberant, scratchy work of Quentin Blake – of whatever size – is instantly recognisable. He has embraced the new projects that the technology of digital printing has opened up for him. "The copies of my drawings are so true to the originals it is almost impossible to distinguish them," he told me, "and I am looking forward to even more ground-breaking projects, creating drawings to please and amuse young and old. I started off as a cartoonist and what a great life I have."



From *Mother and Babies Underwater* at the Centre Hospitalier Universitaire d'Angers in France

Quentin has written in much more detail in his latest book *Quentin Blake Beyond the Page*. It is not just a look back at what he has achieved but promises a lot more inspirational work for the future. He had no idea of what would follow when he drew on the walls of the National Gallery but many thousands of people are glad that his work has become larger than life and, still looking forward, who knows what that most endearing illustrator, Quentin Blake, will do next?

David Blanch

From *Ordinary Life* for the Vincent Square Eating Disorder Clinic, London

- Patrick £6.99 Red Fox ISBN: 978-1849410472
- Mr. Magnolia £6.99 Red Fox ISBN: 978-1862308077
- Quentin Blake: Words & Pictures Cape o/p
- The Quentin Blake Treasury £19.99 Cape ISBN: 978-0857550477
- Angel Pavement £6.99 Red Fox ISBN: 978-0099451549
- You're Only Young Twice £6.99 Andersen ISBN: 978-1842708569
- Quentin Blake Beyond the Page £19.99 Tate ISBN: 978-1849760836