

NEWS RELEASE

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THE SNOWY DAY AND THE ART OF EZRA JACK KEATS Opens at the National Museum of American Jewish History July 19

First Major U.S. Exhibition to Pay Tribute to Award-Winning Author and Illustrator

Philadelphia, PA - *The Snowy Day and the Art of Ezra Jack Keats*, the first major United States exhibition to pay tribute to award-winning author and illustrator Ezra Jack Keats (1916-1983), whose beloved children's books include *Whistle for Willie* (1964), *Peter's Chair* (1967), and *The Snowy Day* (1962), opens at the National Museum of American Jewish History on July 19 and remains on view through October 20, 2013.



Published at the height of the American civil-rights movement and winner of the prestigious Caldecott Medal, *The Snowy Day* became a milestone, featuring the first African-American protagonist in a modern full-color picture book. *The Snowy Day* went on to inspire generations of readers, and paved the way for multiracial representations in American children's literature. Also pioneering were the urban settings of Keats's stories; picture books had rarely featured such gritty

landscapes before.

Organized by The Jewish Museum in New York City, the exhibition features more than 80 original works - from preliminary sketches and dummy books, to final paintings and collages for the artist's most popular books. Also on view are examples of Keats's most introspective but less-known work, inspired by Asian art and haiku poetry, as well as documentary material and photographs.

Ezra Jack Keats was born Jacob (Jack) Ezra Katz in Brooklyn in 1916. His parents were Eastern European Jewish immigrants and very poor. Although he briefly studied painting in Paris on the GI Bill after serving in World War II, Keats was primarily self-taught. He drew upon memories of growing up in East New York, one of the most deprived neighborhoods of New York City. Keats's experience of anti-Semitism and poverty in his youth gave him a lifelong sympathy for others who suffered prejudice and want. His work transcends the personal and reflects the universal concerns of children.

"The child of Jewish immigrants and a true innovator, Keats blended the everyday world of his Brooklyn home with his passion for social justice and Asian art," stated Dr. Josh Perelman, NMAJH's chief curator and director of exhibitions. "Families and art lovers alike will delight in the colorful illustrations featured in the exhibition and in reading together from the many timeless classics of American literature Keats authored or illustrated."



Keats used lush color in his paintings and collages and strove for simplicity in his texts. He was often more intent on capturing a mood than developing a plot. His preferred format was the horizontal double-page spread, which freed him to alternate close-up scenes with panoramic views. By the end of his life in 1983, he had illustrated over eighty books, most of them for children, twenty-two of which he also authored.

The Snowy Day and the Art of Ezra Jack Keats explores Keats's multifaceted oeuvre in six sections preceded by an introduction and followed by an epilogue.

The introductory gallery presents a selection of works that can be construed as self-portraits of the artist. Throughout his career Keats often cast himself in his work, posing as different characters, from the immigrant violinist János in *Penny Tunes* and *Princesses* (1972) to the exuberant junkman Barney in *Louie's Search* (1980).

"Coming of Age in Brooklyn" features seminal works inspired by memories of Keats's tenement childhood, including a selection of illustrations for *Apt. 3* (1971) showcasing some of his most painterly spreads. Also on view are final drawings for *Dreams* (1974), where color travels out of the Brooklyn windows and into the night as the tenement's inhabitants begin to dream and darkness turns into incandescence. Keats's combination of paint and marbled paper reaches a pinnacle in these illustrations. The artist's lengthy preoccupation with Louie, protagonist of some of Keats's most autobiographic stories, is examined in this section through a series of illustrations for *Louie* (1975), *The Trip* (1978), *Louie's Search* (1980), and *Regards to the Man in the Moon* (1981).

In "Bringing the Background to the Foreground," the artist's early identification with the downtrodden is reflected in his 1934 award-winning painting, *Shantytown*. Created by Keats during the Depression, it is being shown along with other socially committed works. In order to express the significance of *The Snowy Day* within the history of American children's literature, an exhibition case is devoted to a brief survey of African-American representation in children's books throughout the 20th century. Illustrations for *My Dog is Lost!* (1960), coauthored by Keats and Pat Cherr, about a Puerto Rican boy named Juanito, are also on display. This is Keats's first attempt to correct the problems of representation in children's literature at the time and cast a minority child as protagonist. This pioneering move likely paved the way for his creation of Peter of *The Snowy Day* fame.

"The Snowy Day" section presents a wide selection of illustrations for the 1962 landmark book as well as for *Whistle for Willie* (1964) and *Peter's Chair* (1967), featuring Peter as he grows up. *The Snowy Day's* critical reception and the debate sparked by its publication are also examined.

"Peter's Neighborhood" includes a rich selection of images for three of Keats's greatly loved books: *A Letter to Amy* (1968), *Hi Cat!* (1970) and *Pet Show!* (1972), featuring Peter on his way to becoming a teenage boy, as well as his friend Archie, who takes on more of a central role as Peter grows older. The selected illustrations are filled with



Keats's signature elements - abandoned old doors, overflowing garbage cans, trashed umbrellas, and graffitied walls; the background elements the artist was committed to bringing to the foreground in his books. A reading room for visitors of all ages inspired by Peter's neighborhood and Brooklyn tenement brownstone stoops, complements this section.

Keats's most introspective work is the focus of the "Spirituality, Nature, and Asian Art" section. On display are

illustrations for *In a Spring Garden* (1965), an anthology of haiku poems, with silhouetted animals set against skies of marbled paper; and his sumptuous art for *Over the Meadow* (1971), combining watercolor and collage. A preparatory drawing for *The Giant Turnip*, a Russian folktale that Keats chose to illustrate as a Japanese story, is also on view. The book was nearing completion at the time of the artist's death in 1983.

In "Keats at Work," Keats's actual palette, brushes, materials used in his collages, and samples of marbled paper he created for his illustrations are displayed. In addition, visitors can view a film in which the artist demonstrates the technique of creating marbled paper, and other illustrators and authors who knew Keats comment on his wide-ranging influence.

The exhibition ends with concluding illustrations for four Louie books first examined at the beginning of the show. These books, created by Keats late in life, bring him back full circle to where it all began: his old Brooklyn neighborhood. The four spreads provide a moving epilogue to the show, including the last illustration from *Regards to the Man in the Moon* (1981), published two years before Keats's death, the first and only known instance in which he cast himself as an artist, brush in hand.

The exhibition was organized by Claudia Nahson, Morris and Eva Feld Curator at The Jewish Museum. The exhibition installation design was created by Barbara Suhr. Kris Stone designed the reading room and a theatrical backdrop.

Exhibition Catalogue

In conjunction with the exhibition, The Jewish Museum and Yale University Press co-published *The Snowy Day and the Art of Ezra Jack Keats*. The 104-page catalogue includes 80 color and 3 black-and-white illustrations, essays by Claudia Nahson and Maurice Berger, and an illustrated timeline by Emily Casden and Ms. Nahson. The hardcover book will be available at the Museum Store for \$32.00 and online at www.judaicashop.net.

Sponsorship

The Snowy Day and The Art of Ezra Jack Keats is organized by The Jewish Museum from the collection of the de Grummond Children's Literature Collection, The University of Southern Mississippi. The exhibition is funded through a generous grant from the Ezra Jack Keats Foundation. Additional support has been provided by the Joseph Alexander Foundation, the Alfred J. Grunebaum Memorial Fund, and the Winnick Family Foundation.

Related Programs

Tuesdays, July 2, 9, and 16 - 10:30-12:00 pm

Illustrating Childhood: The History of Children's Book Illustration in the United States

-- Instructor: Mary F. Zawadzki Ph.D. Candidate

-- Over the course of three sessions, the Illustrating Childhood course will review the history of children's book illustration from the nineteenth century through the present, surveying a broad spectrum of stylistic and socio-cultural developments.

August 4 - A Snowy Day in August: Keats Family Day

-- Hourly 11:00 to 4:00 - Storytelling/reading

-- 10:30 am and 1:30 pm - Screenings of animated films of Keats's books including *The Snowy Day*, *Whistle for Willie*, *Peter's Chair*, *Pet Show!*, *A Letter to Amy*, *The Trip*, and *Apt. 3*.

-- 1:00 pm - *How to Build a Storm: The Weather Show*, presented by The Franklin Institute.

-- Various arts and crafts activities throughout the Museum, including book-making, hat decorating, and puppet making.

The Museum will also hold several programs in collaboration with the Rosenbach of the Free Library of Philadelphia Foundation, which will be celebrating the 50th anniversary of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* with *The Night Max Wore His Wolf Suit: 50 Years of Wild Things* from June 11, 2013 through March 2, 2014.

Those programs are as follows:

September 8 - Grandparents Day

-- Grandparents and kids are admitted free of charge to NMAJH and The Rosenbach!

- Screenings of animated Keats and Sendak books including *Where the Wild Things Are*, *In the Night Kitchen*, *The Nutshell Kids*, *Alligators All Around*, *One was Johnny*, *Pierre*, *Chicken Soup with Rice*, *The Snowy Day*, *Whistle for Willie*, *Peter's Chair*, *Pet Show!*, *A Letter to Amy*, *The Trip*, and *Apt. 3*
- Various arts and crafts activities throughout the Museum
- Docent-led conversations, guided tours, and spotlight talks

October 13

- 11:00 am *Tell Them Anything You Want: A Portrait of Maurice Sendak* film screening
Talkback to follow
- 2:00 pm *Where the Wild Things Are* film screening
Both screenings are FREE with Museum admission

October 16 - 7:00 pm Panel discussion: Children's Literature and Social Justice

Curricula and Family Guides

A Family Guide for the exhibition will be available at the information desk throughout the run of the exhibition. Special curricula will be offered for preschools, school/camp groups, and families. Please contact education@nmajh.org or call 215.923.3811 x153 for more information.

About the National Museum of American Jewish History

The National Museum of American Jewish History, located on historic Independence Mall in Philadelphia, brings to life the 350-year history of Jews in America. Tracing the stories of how Jewish immigrants became Jewish Americans, the Museum invites visitors of all heritages to share their own stories and reflect on how their histories and identities shape and are shaped by the American experience. An open door for all, NMAJH honors the past and contributes to a better future by sharing the power of imagination and ideas, culture and community, leadership and service, in ways that turn inspiration into action.

The National Museum of American Jewish History is located at 101 South Independence Mall East at the corner of Fifth and Market Streets in Philadelphia. Museum hours are Tuesday to Friday, 10:00 am - 5:00 pm, and Saturday and Sunday 10:00 am - 5:30 pm. NMAJH is closed most Mondays, including federal holidays and some Jewish holidays. Museum admission is \$12.00 for adults, \$11.00 for senior citizens and youth, free for children 12 and under, Museum Members, and active military with ID. On Wednesdays between Memorial Day and Labor Day, the Museum will stay open until 8:00 pm. Admission after 5:00 PM is pay-what-you-wish. For information on the Museum, the public may call 215.923.3811 or visit the website at <http://www.nmajh.org>.

Image credits in order:

Ezra Jack Keats, "Crunch, crunch, crunch, his feet sank into the snow." Final illustration for *The Snowy Day*, 1962. Collage and paint on board. Ezra Jack Keats Papers, de Grummond Children's Literature Collection, McCain Library and Archives, The University of Southern Mississippi. Copyright Ezra Jack Keats Foundation.

Ezra Jack Keats, Dust jacket. Final illustration for *A Letter to Amy*, 1968. Watercolor, collage, and paint on board. Ezra Jack Keats Papers, de Grummond Children's Literature Collection, McCain Library and Archives, The University of Southern Mississippi. Copyright Ezra Jack Keats Foundation.

Ezra Jack Keats, Endpapers. Final illustration for *Over in the Meadow*, by Olive A. Wadsworth, 1971. Collage and watercolor on board. Ezra Jack Keats Papers, de Grummond Children's Literature Collection, McCain Library and Archives, The University of Southern Mississippi. Copyright Ezra Jack Keats Foundation.

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