

“Ingenious! The World of Dr. Seuss”

Exhibit Review by John Wilkens¹



Worm Burning Bright in the Forest in the Night, 1969, by Dr. Seuss.

There’s a cat, not wearing a hat, playing pool and smoking a cigarette. There’s a female bird, in a see-through negligee, holding a martini. There’s a band playing music at a New Year’s Eve Party. As surprising as some of the material is, it’s also decidedly Seussian, full of the kinds of whimsical characters,

Theodor Geisel called them his “midnight paintings”—art that he did for his own enjoyment and kept private, away from the public who knew him as Dr. Seuss. A new exhibit of reproductions of these little-known and infrequently shown works is currently showing at the San Diego History Center in Balboa Park, offering locals a fuller picture of the late La Jolla author’s artistic talents and wink-and-nudge humor.



The Cat in the Hat welcomes guests to the exhibit at the San Diego History Center.

1. Reprinted with permission from the *UT San Diego*, December 2014.

bright colors and clever titles that make his children's books so popular and so distinctive, even today, 23 years after he died at age 87. "Seuss is Seuss through and through," said Bill Dreyer, one of the curators of the exhibit, "Ingenious! The World of Dr. Seuss."

So it is that the earliest known painting, "Abduction of the Sabine Woman," from 1930, seven years before Seuss did his first kid's book, includes an elephant that looks very much like the one that would become Horton. And so it is that his 1933 cover for *Judge* magazine, "After Dark in the Park," has fish like those that would populate "One Fish, Two Fish" and turtles that would feel right at home with Yertle.

"The paintings are breathtaking," said Roz Casarez, a Yucaipa resident who toured the exhibit the morning after it opened. "They give you a little bit of his human side, which I've always wondered about, how real he was. I mean, who eats green eggs and ham?" She said she was particularly drawn to two of the paintings, "Freebird" and "Firebird," shown side by side, which to her are a reflection of the emotional ups-and-downs life inevitably brings, even to the rich and famous.

Dreyer said the exhibit has been in other places, most recently Portland, but the show here has a strong San Diego feeling. One wall includes seven of Seuss' "La Jolla Birdwomen" paintings, playful spoofings of high-society life. There are also large photos of him in his Mount Soledad studio.

Another part of the exhibit is devoted to his most famous children's books, including *The Lorax* and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* There are craft stations for kids to explore themes from the books, prints of original sketches, and statues of various characters. Kids flocked to that area in full giggle the next day, including Olive Ross, 2. "The only books she'll let us read to her are Dr. Seuss," said her mother, Jasmine Ross, as Olive turned the pages of *Oh, The Places You'll Go!*

The books at their Palm Springs area home, by the way, are the same copies Jasmine Ross had when she was a kid, an example of the reach the author continues to have across the generations.

"Dr. Seuss was a genius," Dreyer said. "He knew how to speak to the child in all of us, even the adults."

The Dr. Seuss exhibit runs through the end of 2015.



The Grinch surprises exhibit sponsor Ann Navarra.



Incidental Music for a New Year's Eve Party by Dr. Seuss. First published as a black-and-white center spread in *Judge* magazine in 1932, and again in color in the Danish magazine *Illustreret Familie-Journal*, circa 1932. This work embodies all the best of Geisel's musically exaggerated imagination and is an early hallmark that set the stage for an elaborate history of made-up vehicles, machines, and instruments.



Madison Moran interacts with *Green Eggs and Ham*.



Ryan Moran, standing with Horton, hears a Who.