Introducing A "New Artist"

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Introducing A "New Artist"

Symeon Shimin

by Lillian Heil

In June, 1992, when we (the editorial board of CBR) saw Ann Herbert’s book, Sam, illustrated by Symeon Shimin, we were immediately attracted to the wistful look on Sam’s face as he was rebuffed and corrected by each person in his family. The illustrations showed such warmth with the shaded backs and grays against the apricot background (You’ll have to check the color out with the book—it won’t show in our reproductions of Shimin’s work). The eager, wistful, and finally broken-hearted looks on the face of Sam, the youngest in the family, were enough to convince us that we had discovered a new artist to feature in one of the issues of CBR. We wrote to Putnam to ask if we might reproduce illustrations from Sam so our readers could also meet Symeon Shimin. Putnam gave us permission with a note saying the book was originally published in 1967 and had been reprinted in 1992 and added, “as you know, Symeon Shimin is deceased.” No, we didn’t know, and realized we had "discovered" Shimin too late to honor him during his lifetime. But his illustrations are still with us. So if you, like us, have not seen the work of this talented artist, (or have forgotten about him) you can still get acquainted with Symeon Shimin.
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He was born in Astrakhan, Russia in 1902, and with his family came to the United States that same year. His father was a cabinet maker and antique dealer. Shimin married and had two children. His residence was in New York City. He was mainly self taught although he did do an apprenticeship with a commercial artist when he was only 15. He also spent a year in France and Spain studying El Greco, Goya, and other well-known painters.

His sister rebuffs him.

Taken from Sam. Copyright © 1967 by Ann Herbert Scott and Symeon Shimin. Reprinted by permission from Philomel Books, a division of The Putnam & Grosset Book Group.

His first illustrations for a children’s book were done in 1950 for the revised edition of Herman Nina Schneider’s How Big Is Big? (W. R. Scott, publisher). He illustrated several old favorites such as Joseph Krumgold’s Onion John (Crowell, 1959), Aileen Fisher’s, Listen Rabbit (Crowell, 1964), Milicent Selsam’s, All Kinds of Babies (Scholastic, 1967), and Byrd Baylor’s, Coyote Cry. These titles are only a fraction of the nearly 50 children’s books he illustrated, or wrote and illustrated. His favorites were One Small Blue Bead (by Schweitzer), Dance in a Desert (by L’Engle), A Special Birthday (illustrated and written by Shimin), and I Wish There Were Two of Me (illustrated and written by Shimin).
His work always conveys the kind of warmth and sympathy for the animals and people that you see in *Sam*, the book we are featuring. Every nuance of expression fits, and it’s apparent that Shimin did what he said he did to create his pictures:

I always use live models since I believe the individual characters to be more meaningful. I do dozens of drawings from each sketch, working and reworking until I am satisfied - until I feel the illustrations are right. I work in watercolor and acrylcs. I like to allow about three months to do a book. I absolutely hate deadlines!

So in this issue, we hope you’ll take time to enjoy the artistic conviction and talent of Symeon Shimin. We think you might fall in love with Sam and perhaps take the time to get acquainted (or reacquainted) with some of the other work done by an artist who, in his picture books for children, left us a rich legacy of compassion and concern for the world.