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An Interview With Mark Graham, A Renaissance Artist and Art Educator

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Mark Graham admits his shyness made it easier for him to communicate complex feelings visually than verbally; but his desire to share insights gained through visual aesthetic ways of knowing involved him in art education. These two concerns—creating art and teaching about art dictate the division of Graham’s professional time.

He grew up in Salt Lake City and attended the University of Utah graduating with a major in art and mathematics. In 1973 he married a fellow art student, Cathy Savage, also of Salt Lake City. After graduation they moved to NYC for further study of art and art education. He painted under the tutelage of Renaissance master, Frank Mason at the Art Students’ League and got a master’s degree in art education at Columbia University. Pursuing his goal of art as an integral part of the curriculum, he taught in a high school humanities program in Westchester and high school art classes in Long Island.

When asked how he got into illustrating children’s books Graham said a friend took him to exhibits sponsored by the Society of Illustrators and he liked what he saw. He submitted paintings that were accepted and published in their catalog. Art editors who were checking out new and promising illustrators saw his work, liked his renaissance style and asked him to do illustrations for magazines and book covers. In the late 1980’s Margaret McElderry asked him to illustrate a short children’s chapter book by Kathryn Galbraith entitled Roommates. Graham said he was not aware, at the time, of the respect McElderry commanded in the publishing world so he didn’t fully realize his good fortune. He chose one of those illustrations for CBPR because he liked the way it captured the personality of Mimi, precariously balancing on one foot, looking as if her armload of toys might fly in all directions at any moment. Notice the soft quality of the drawings that reveal the innocence of the child and communicate feelings about her personality that are hard to describe in words. McElderry liked his work and very shortly asked him to illustrate in full color a story about a cat (Charlie Anderson) by Barbara Abercrombie. For Graham the choice of the right model for the main character in a story is crucial. Cat lovers know that modeling for children’s picture books is not high on the list of cats’ preferred activities. Graham had to find seven or eight cat models with
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striped markings. Luckily a cooperative friend made Jesse, his old striped tabby easily available. As Graham worked, Jesse became thinner and thinner, finally dying of old age after the illustrations were finished. Get Charlie Anderson and look at the dedication to Jesse, whose body gave out at the book's completion.

Capturing feelings visually is so important to Graham that he has to have what might be described as a spiritual kinship with the children who are his models. (I'm not sure how that works with the animals.) In his words he "has to be enchanted by the personality of the child." In contrast to his mystical-beyond-words approach, his publisher only insists that the model be the right age for the story.

Graham's approach to his illustrations goes beyond the choice of models. Each book contains his feelings about his own life, reflecting again his philosophy that art is a way of expressing feelings and discovering oneself. For example while illustrating Home by Five for Ruth Wallace-Brodeur (1992) Graham was moving from Manhattan to Long Island and feeling very nostalgic about favorite haunts near his apartment. The city scenes in the book show his favorite bakery and the streets of Soho. Another example is his current project - illustrating a story by Bonnie Pryor. It is also set in NYC and he has been away from the city since July 1994, much longer than the usual summer visits to Utah. His love for New York scenes understandably adds a warm feeling to his illustrations for the book and provides more evidence of the integrating quality of aesthetic experience.

The softness of Graham’s style is even more evident in the oil paintings he does for his full color illustrations. From one of his favorite books Shadows Are About (by Ann Paul), Graham selected his second illustration for CBPR. Favored because the story allowed him to use the youngest of his three sons as a model, Graham likes the beginning picture showing the little boy asleep because "there is something wonderful about the look of children when they are asleep." (Who knows, perhaps their look of innocent sweetness results from dreams of angels). It is no accident that the rich and luminous quality of Graham’s illustrations reminds the viewer of American artist Whistler and earlier Renaissance artists (such as Raphael, Titian or Da Vinci). Since its beginning in the late 1800’s the tradition of the Art Students’ League (where Graham studied) has been centered around Renaissance style artists like Whistler and Frank Mason who both painted and tutored students in painting. It is a style inspired by a rebirth of interest in the pursuit of beauty and knowledge for everyone and expresses how Graham views children and young people. In his words "they are eternally idealistic and hopeful." His desire to make aesthetic knowledge an integral part of their lives is motivated by the self awareness and imagination it has expanded for him; his interest in art education has promoted an ongoing dialog with Waterford School during summer visits to Utah as they work to develop a Fine Arts Academy.

The third illustration chosen for CBPR further exemplifies his philosophy of life, both in art and in art education. He wants to suggest "a feeling of magic and excitement that can’t quite be put into words." The illustration is from Greenbrook Farm by Bonnie Pryor and in 1992 was chosen for the yearly show of original picture book art by his fellow artists in the Society of Illustrators. Look for the little girl standing on tiptoe to check on the protective mother farm cat and her latest litter of kittens. Graham has captured a look of wonder, excitement and curiosity about the world epitomizing the best of the Renaissance feeling of hope, delight and desire for knowledge. It follows that what Graham hopes to accomplish in curriculum design is art as a meaningful discipline, not a frill. He is now the Art Director at Waterford School working to make art part of every child’s education. But his other love is illustrating, and the publishing world is centered around NYC. Art and art education are dividing
both his location and his time. There’s never enough of the latter. Graham says his publishers frequently ask him to illustrate his own stories; for quite a while he has been working on a fantasy story but time for it has to be squeezed in between illustration deadlines for other authors, curriculum meetings, teaching and family. Graham volunteered that the art style for his own story has the same wonder and excitement but it is not so literal. It has a more mysterious quality, as befits a fantasy and his desire to trigger thoughts of the viewer - "ideas suggested but not fully revealed."

So, whether he’s creating art or curriculum, Graham wants art to provide children of all ages the means for being thoughtful, creative and imaginative as they search for knowledge of the world and of themselves.