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Lois Ehlert: The Artist of Shape and Color

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Lois Ehlert’s books are not hard to locate on the library shelves because her large, simplified shapes and electric colors make them stand out. Her attention to using just the right shade of color explains why Ehlert stopped working on picture books in the late fifties. Publishers were not giving her the right to approve final color selections. Ehlert had learned the importance of color and shape at an early age. As a child in Wisconsin, she was encouraged by her parents to do artistic projects. Her mother provided her with colorful scraps of cloth, and her father furnished scraps of wood. She even had her own small work room furnished with a card table (a table which in a remodeled form is still used for art projects).

Ehlert received a scholarship to the Layton School of Art, graduating in 1957. After graduation she began illustrating children’s books but turned to graphic design projects because the color reproduction didn’t meet her standard of quality. Her awards include recognition from the Art Directors Club of Milwaukee (1961-65), Graphic Arts awards from the Printing Industries of America (1980-81), and Award of Excellence citations from the Art Museum Association of America (1985-87).

In the mid 1980’s, friends convinced Ehlert that picture book publishers had changed, and she began working on children’s books again. Planting a Rainbow, which tells how a mother and child cultivate a flower garden, appeared in 1988. Ehlert’s ability to distill the essence of each flower in a simplified shape can be seen in the reproduction of the morning glory. The star provides the clue to the flower and the heart-shaped leaves portray the shape that easily identifies a morning glory leaf. The vibrant blue provides the precise color needed.

and some blue flowers,

Taken from Planting a Rainbow by Lois Ehlert. Copyright ©1988 by Lois Ehlert. Reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace & Company.
About her careful, clear shapes, Ehlert says, "I didn’t want to be gimmicky; I wanted to distill, to get the essence of what it was that was so exciting. I hope I’m still exploring that idea. I don’t see any sense in creating books otherwise." One reviewer noted that Ehlert’s "colors are tropical, electric and hot—the grape purples and sizzling pinks children tend to choose when they paint." Her pairing of complementary hues gives them "a visual shimmer that makes them jump off the page," and explains why her books are so easy to locate from among other volumes of more subdued color. Her use of complementary colors narrowed the selection of illustrations to accompany this article. The complementary colors do not work in black and white. The vegetable cross sections originally chosen did not show up against a complementary background. Instead of shimmering, as they did in color, they disappeared. So the page from *Eating the Alphabet* shows simplified persimmon, pomegranate, papaya and plum shapes against a white background.

In deciding the composition, she "made color photocopies of all the water color fruit paintings because the art was so fragile."

*Feathers for Lunch* is a story of a hungry cat who chases a dozen birds for lunch but gets only feathers because his neck bell warns birds of his presence. Ehlert wanted the birds to be education, as well as decorative, so she checked

Taken from *Eating the Alphabet* by Lois Ehlert. Copyright ©1989 by Lois Ehlert. Used by permission from Harcourt Brace & Company.
So he keeps prowling, hoping to munch,

Taken from *Feathers for Lunch* by Lois Ehlert. Copyright ©1990 by Lois Ehlert. Used by permission from Harcourt Brace & Company.
the color and size against skins of birds kept at
the Field Museum in Chicago. She presents the
birds in natural setting with flowers that are
harmonious with the birds' actual colors."

To solve the scale problem of the cat in the
illustrations of the American Goldfinch, Ehlert
shows parts of the cat or replaces him entirely
with the "Jingle Jingle" of his bell." Finally,
Ehlert wanted children to learn names of
vegetables, flowers, and birds so she labeled
them. The last illustration from Feathers shows
her concern for accuracy. Plainly printed on the
woodpecker page is the actual size and a note at
the bottom explaining which birds in the book
are the actual size and which are reduced.

Ehlert wants to surprise and delight children
with her essential shapes, which can match with
real vegetables, flowers, and birds, her vibrant
colors, and even her use of typography. She
once stood in front of a mirror to see how close
she had to come to read a line of black type on
blue paper.

Admittedly the black and white repro­
ductions of Ehlert's illustrations do not do justice
to this articulate artist of colors. Readers must
now search the shelves of libraries and
bookstores for Ehlert's unique shapes and colors
to truly appreciate this master artist.

Works Cited:

Olendorf, Donna, ed. Something About the
Author Series. Vol. 69, p. 52 Lois Ehlert.