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## Paul Zelinsky: An Artist With a Thousand Styles

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“An artist with a thousand styles” may be an exaggeration at present, but Paul Zelinsky has astounded editors, librarians, and teachers with the breadth and richness of his art. With more than two dozen illustrated books to his credit, this Caldecott Honor and Medal winner “tries to make the book talk as it talks to me, and not worry whether it is in my style or not . . . I get a kick out of doing each book differently” (Marantz 1986). In fact, shortly after receiving the 1998 Caldecott Medal for *Rapunzel*, Zelinsky explained, “I recently decided that I should be recognized by my unrecognizability” (Lannon 1998).

In describing how he creates the illustrations for the words of a story, Zelinsky has said, “I want to capture the feelings—grab them and hold on, because they are fleeting—and figure out how to make pictures that support and intensify them” (Zelinsky “Voices” 1995). Zelinsky often translates feelings into tastes. He notes that the song “Wheels on the Bus” reminds him of bubble gum—sweet and bouncy; and that Lore Segal’s *The Story of Mrs. Lovewright and Purrless Her Cat* brings to mind dill pickles: “sour, deliciously flavorful, and somehow unintentionally funny” (“Voices” 1995).

At the 1999 Symposium on Books for Young Readers at Brigham Young University, Zelinsky detailed the creation of the illustrations for his Caldecott Medal-winning book *Rapunzel*. In his speech, Zelinsky reiterated that “the taste and flavor of a book is very important to me.” What would be the taste and feel of *Rapunzel*? The artist discussed both taste and feeling.

After deciding to retell the story, Zelinsky immediately began his research. The Grimm brothers had borrowed the Rapunzel story from a 1790 German retelling of a French fairytale, which borrowed from an Italian folktale.

Zelinsky’s retelling is a blend of Grimm and the earlier French and Italian versions. He drew on the detail-laden style of Italian Renaissance paintings for his vibrant illustrations. The architecture and landscapes come from Italy where, he said, they “had beautiful towers inlaid in marble.”

On the dust jacket, the top of the tower, with its pillars and intricate inlays, frames the heroine, who gazes forlornly upon the world. Zelinsky wanted to show Rapunzel trapped in a small space, wanting to get out into the big world. The pose, inspired by Rembrandt’s portrait of Agatha Bas, shows her intense sense of separation. She tentatively invites the viewer in with her raised hand. Zelinsky noted that his original cover illustration created a problem; it showed too much of Rapunzel and not enough of the tower. He had to create an illustration that would balance the two.

The next problem was the illustration at the beginning of the story. The original book illustration showed a couple sitting together, but Zelinsky’s editor thought it was too weak to capture the interest of the reader. In the spirit of Italian renaissance painters, who stole ideas and poses from each other, Zelinsky considered Giotto’s painting *Joachim and Anna*, but it was too static. He finally stole a pose from a painting by Rembrandt, entitled *The Jewish Couple*. The husband rests his hand on his wife’s belly because she is expecting a baby. In Zelinsky’s illustration, the apple on the plate to the left is a symbol of fertility, but Zelinsky advised that it does matter whether the reader recognizes the symbolism because the apple fills the space. A window is in the picture; the following text indicates that the wife sits by it when she looks into the witch’s garden. It is a beautiful, formal garden with a

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fountain, bushes and trees trimmed into intricate shapes, statues, animals, and, of course, the rampion. When the sorceress discovers the husband stealing rampion for his wife, she barter the rampion for the child the wife is carrying.

When Zelinsky tried to find out what rampion (*rapunzel* in German) looked and tasted like, garden experts in America couldn't help him. He finally got an English seed catalog and ordered rampion seeds. The green herb, used in salads, tastes a bit like arugula and watercress. Its bitter taste hints at the bitter losses ahead for Rapunzel, her parents, and her future husband. In his retelling, Zelinsky chose to use the German name. Rapunzel has a beautiful purple, bell-shaped flower, used by Zelinsky throughout the book. There is a spray of rampion on the title page and on each new section of the story; and on the lower part of Rapunzel's ornate tower there are eight large, bell-shaped purple flowers. Zelinsky chose to use purple for Rapunzel's gowns. Her adult dress has the bell shape of the flower at the front of the bodice, and a blossom hangs from her locket.

The bedroom in which Rapunzel is born comes from a Venetian painting. The light in front of the witch as she carries the baby away shows her entrance into a new life. Zelinsky made the sorceress a sympathetic character who just couldn't let go of her stolen daughter. He commented that he wanted to make the witch beautiful, like Lillian Gish.

Another artistic challenge was finding fabric that would wrinkle and fold into the lovely shapes of Rapunzel's dresses and cloaks. The folds create drama and movement in the illustration that shows the witch confronting the husband in the garden. The diagonal lines of the drapery of the brilliant turquoise and black cloak produce a swirling movement around the irate sorceress. Similar movement and feeling are created when the witch discovers that Rapunzel is pregnant.

The model for the cat, which appears as a kitten and matures along with Rapunzel, is the Zelinsky family cat, letting the reader know that *Rapunzel* was not created in a matter of weeks or even months. The cat is a silent observer to all the

events in Rapunzel's life, showing intense interest when the prince steps through the window, registering alarm when the witch berates Rapunzel for wickedness, wandering with her in the wilderness, and settling down with the family when they finally arrive at the prince's palace.

Zelinsky commented that he also had trouble with the picture of the witch cutting Rapunzel's hair. He tried different versions and many angles. His editor thought Rapunzel should be fighting back, but when Zelinsky tried that approach he decided it looked too much like a paperback novel. He finally depicted her hanging on to her hair in a useless way. The cuckoo bird near the tower is a symbol of betrayal. Zelinsky could not find a picture of such a bird in flight, and so he used a stuffed one in a museum as his model. Six months later he found a picture of a flying cuckoo, which he said was much better than his.

The illustration showing the prince lying at the bottom of the tower, Rapunzel's hair waving in the breeze, and a very small cat starting his climb down the tower (I wondered how that cat got out) was inspired by a fifteenth century fresco by Masaccio showing Adam leaving paradise. And the final illustration depicting the happy ending was inspired by Raphael's painting of the Madonna and Child.

After Zelinsky's presentation at the Symposium on Books for Young Readers, he participated in a question and answer session. Zelinsky was asked how Rapunzel got out of the tower without her hair. He advised that he didn't have to know, but it must be by magic, because she was kept there by a sorceress, who could put her in and get her out by magic, adding that magic is complicated and is not used every day—just for special occasions.

When asked if he worked from the first of the book to the last, he answered no, but added that he does plot out the scene for each picture before he does any of the final pictures. Zelinsky is a meticulous craftsman; he underpaints all his illustrations first and then uses oil paints. He said, "I tend to learn how to do what I'm doing better as I do the book." So "later drawings are generally better than the first ones" (Zelinsky "Artist"

1998). To avoid the feeling of starting out crudely and becoming facile at the end he does them out of order.

Zelinsky wants readers to enjoy his story; he would also like to educate them about great art and the visual history of the Italian Renaissance. That is why he did research into the architecture, the furniture, the dishes, the clothing, the gardens, and the kinds of plants that made up life in Italy during this period of time. Rapunzel can be used by parents and teachers to introduce Italian art and history to children. Finally, he would like to be seen as “someone who could take a lot of different fine texts and give them their perfect visual expression” (Lannon 1998). Zelinsky’s lofty goal also explains why his illustrations are done in so many varied styles—to fit each story “perfectly.”

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