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Rembrandt, Picasso and Glen Rounds?

by Lillian Heil

What do Rembrandt, Picasso and Glen Rounds have in common? Your answer would probably be a quick, "Rembrandt and Picasso were both famous artists but who is Glen Rounds?"

Glen Rounds is also an artist. He illustrates picture books for children. You’ll see illustrations from three of his books in this issue of CBR. Is that the only similarity? No. Glen was born in 1906, the son of William and Janet Rounds, who ran a ranch in South Dakota. At the age of 20, he attended the Kansas City Art Institute for a year. He held a variety of jobs including muleskinner, cowboy, sign painter, carnival medicine man, and textile designer. He experimented with etching and painting, and then wrote stories to go with his drawings and eventually became known as a children’s book writer and illustrator.

I’m an artist who has written for a living—learned the trade freehand. I’m listed as a juvenile writer but I don’t write for children. All I’m interested in at the time is the tale itself and the drawings that will go with it—or that came before the story itself.

I sort of drift, doing mostly only what pleases me.

Rembrandt didn’t care much for the opinions of his audience either. In fact, when some of the men in the famous "Night Watch" painting complained bitterly that they wouldn’t pay their share for the group portrait because their faces were too small or were half hidden, Rembrandt didn’t change the painting. He didn’t appear to care if he lost customers. Perhaps his ability to show the inner characters of people he painted frightened the wealthy people who were his clientele. Fewer of them commissioned him to paint their portraits; but Rembrandt went right on painting and drawing the way he wanted. Evidently he, like Glen Rounds, "did mostly what pleased him."

And was Picasso like that, too? Definitely! He went to the art academies in Barcelona and Madrid only as long as he was interested (a year or less). He moved from Barcelona to Paris because Barcelona was too resistant to change in art styles. When his admirers were confused and disturbed by his new style that showed disfigured bodies, Picasso went right on painting the way he wished and moved from that to the cubist style which broke objects apart into networks...
of fragmented lines and planes. Picasso continued to try new styles every few years as long as he lived (he died at age 91 in 1973). He was another artist who wanted most of all to please himself. He thought of art "as the visible expression of his inmost mind; his heart, and his soul" (Pablo Picasso by John Beardsley, Harry N. Abrams, 1991, p. 9).

And what kinds of people interest Glen Rounds enough to want to draw or paint them? People who have stories to tell - some of them "mighty peculiar." He knew soldiers, travelling sign painters, cowboys, and lived with the homeless men in Madison Square Park (New York City) during the depression. They were common, poor people, but a sympathetic Glen Rounds found they had uncommon stories to tell. His stock of unusual tales helped him to eat well during those days of scarce money. Rounds would take his drawings to publishers to try to sell them. He timed it so he would arrive not too long before lunch, launch into one of his stories and when lunch time came the editor would invite him to join him so he could hear the end of the story. Rounds comments that "I didn't sell much; they usually wanted something more slick and mannered than my work—but I ate pretty regular" (Something About the Author, Vol. 8, p. 173).

When Rembrandt's art did not fit the tastes of his patrons, he too turned to sketching and painting the common people on the streets. He made many drawings and etchings of beggars. He painted his mother when she was old showing her with wrinkles and watery eyes, but also revealing the inner spirit of a loving woman.

Picasso found the streets of Madrid—people in cafes, the gypsies, circus performers, the dogs, the horses—of much more interest than the Royal Academy of Art (whose entrance exams he passed in a day or so). He seemed to feel a bond with ordinary working people and they appeared in his sketchbooks. He was another artist who shared with Rounds and Rembrandt an interest in what happens in the everyday lives of ordinary people.

Each of these three artists became transformed by their interest in the lives and faces of the people on the street. They became champions of the underdog. Rembrandt’s vision of the inner souls of each of his subjects and his love for the people he painted gave them a nobility which had nothing to do with wealth, fine clothes, or regularity and beauty of features. Picasso painted poor mothers, children, old men, and beggars. His paintings show that he had great sympathy for those experiencing the difficulties of poverty and death. (Pablo Picasso by John Beardsley, p. 26). As he grew older, Picasso’s paintings expressed his outrage at inhumane actions. In 1937, one of his most famous paintings ("Guernica"), expressed this outrage over the death of innocent civilians in the bombing (by Fascist and Nazi planes) of Guernica, a town loyal to the Spanish government. Picasso lived in Paris during World War II. Because he was so famous, the Nazi occupation forces tried hard to win his favor. One German officer, while visiting Picasso, saw a photograph of the Guernica painting in the
studio and asked, "Did you do this?" Picasso answered "No. You did." (Pablo Picasso by John Beardsley, p. 75). There was no doubt as to which side Picasso was on and that he held the Nazi’s responsible for the horror of the war. Picasso, painted with his heart and soul, as well as his mind and eye.

And what does a children’s picture book illustrator draw or paint if he is a champion of the underdog? Ugly old women who are heroines; girls who can do anything; and in the animal world, he makes heroes out of maligned creatures like pigs or even big bad wolves. His drawings show the stubborn determination and clever thinking of the old woman who refused to be outsmarted by her hillbilly, pig-stealing neighbor (Hanna’s Hog). The nonstop action in Charlie Drives the Stage lets us know that soft spoken, book reading, Charlie is not the least bit intimidated by rock slides, robbers, Indians, or floods. At the end, the reader is appropriately surprised and delighted to find out that Charlie—is Charlene. How do you champion a big bad wolf in the story of the three little pigs? By drawing the most scraggly, moth-eaten, woebegone wolf I’ve ever seen. He couldn’t do anything right—but I fell in love with him. If he had lived through his experience with those three little pigs, I’d have taken him home to fatten him up and build up his self esteem. And I would never have forgiven Glen Rounds if he had shown my wolf being boiled to death in that pot of steaming soup. I knew he met his death, but at least I didn’t have to see it.

Do these three very different men, living in very different times, have anything in common by way of style? I think so. It shows mostly in line drawings. It is the ability to say more with less (or the ability to portray the essence of action or character with the fewest lines possible). In Rembrandt’s work I see it in his sketches of beggars. In the etching of the "Old Beggar Woman with a Gourd," he uses very few lines to show the solemn stare on her face, the slight stoop of her body,

Rembrandt, "Old Beggar Woman with a Gourd." Copyright © 1630, etching. Used by permission from National Gallery of Art, Photographic Services, Washington, D.C. 20565.
and the folds of her ragged dress; but those few lines are enough to tell us she is poor, old, has endured some hard times, and is probably stubborn enough to endure a lot more. The Picasso sketch I picked is the "Boar" done in 1952 and done with the least number of lines that I can imagine. Yet the legs, tail, ears, and snout express the jauntiest air I've ever seen. Here's a pig I'd like to meet. He has found the secret to enjoying life no matter what people think of pigs.


And what have I picked to show you from the work of Glen Rounds? Pigs—what else? You can see why I chose these pigs. They are kindred spirits to Picasso's irrepressible boar. They are as jaunty and confident as the boar, 35 years their senior. It's true the lines used by Picasso are sharp and clean, but remember this is a boar who has the educated, cultural heritage of Europe behind him; whereas Rounds uses lines as rough hewn as the wood in an outhouse—very appropriate for a backwoods American hog. Picasso and Rounds must feel the same way about pigs because their style is uncannily similar. Both use a minimal number of exactly the right curves and squiggles to let us know that pigs have personalities and superior intelligence (which knowledgeable pig owners and George Orwell would say "Amen" to).

My final word is that these three artists seem to have prepared the way for each other. Rembrandt's last paintings and etchings moved to an impressionistic
Jaunty, confident pigs! Taken from *Three Little Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf*. Copyright © 1992 by Glen Rounds. Reprinted by permission from Holiday House, New York.

use of light. Impressionists were some of Picasso’s early inspiration and might have helped to free him to try out new styles. Picasso’s focus on the essential inner form of what he saw allowed him to use the least lines possible to express his innermost feelings about the subjects of his paintings. Picasso’s powerful influence on the art world allowed every artist following him to be freer in how they expressed their feelings in their art. But, both children and adults sometimes have trouble valuing or even seeing what marvelous meanings are expressed in a very few lines by Glen Rounds. Take a good look at what he reveals about the underdog, the common people, the old people, and those who aren’t allowed to make full use of talents. Help your children to meet the artist who combines some of the best qualities of Rembrandt and Picasso in his illustrations for the stories he tells for children. Introduce yourself and your children to Glen Rounds.