Meet Utah Artist Lily Toy Hong

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Meet Utah Artist Lily Toy Hong

Interviewed by Lillian H. Heil

When I asked Lily Toy Hong about her success as an artist and author of children's books, she replied that she couldn't believe it was happening to her. In fact, back in January of 1990, when the Albert Whitman Publishing Company sent her a contract for *How the Ox Star Fell From Heaven*, she was afraid to tell anyone in case it wasn't true. She said that she felt incredibly lucky. Well, perhaps, but Lily has also prepared well for her profession.

Lily knew she wanted to illustrate books for children as early as second or third grade. But she didn't share her dream with her family or her teachers. It was a private hope that didn’t emerge until after a considerable struggle to find out what she really wanted to do as an artist. She attended the University of Utah immediately after high school and was accepted into the fine arts program, but she didn’t feel comfortable there. She went to Hawaii for a year, doing a few jobs in art, but mainly just "escaping." She needed time to think about whether she could make a living as an artist. Lily came from a large family. She was the seventh child of nine, and all her siblings were in service professions like nursing and teaching. Lily felt that it was hard for her parents to accept her pursuing art as a profession because art doesn't provide a stable income, and it’s not easy to see how artists can serve humanity.

Fortunately for those who love of picture books, Lily met a commercial artist in Hawaii who confirmed that she did have talent and helped her to understand that she needed training and education. So Lily returned to Salt Lake City and attended the Utah Technical College, where she studied commercial art and design for two years. From there she went to Utah State and obtained her bachelor of fine arts degree. At Utah State she took a class in illustrating children's books. For her class project, she submitted some illustrations for a children's picture book. That was when the idea for the Ox Star was born. Hallmark came to Utah State to interview art students, and Lily was hired by the company after she graduated. She spent three years in Kansas City, Missouri, working with the well-known greeting card company.

At the end of those three years Lily went on a mission for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to Taiwan. She voluntarily spent eighteen...
months teaching people the beliefs of her church. When she returned, she went to an artist friend to discuss what she wanted to do as an artist. She confided in him her desire to write and illustrate children’s books, and he gave her the same advice as had the artist friend in Hawaii: "Go for it." So Lily left the security of Hallmark and returned to Salt Lake City as a freelance artist. You may have seen her literacy poster entitled "Read, Baby, Read" (printed by Albert Whitman Publishing Company) or purchased some of her children’s bed linens, which were designed for Hallmark in conjunction with two well-known linen companies—Fieldcrest and Cannon. (Her designs did better than any others put out by the two companies.)

Lily began to work toward getting children’s picture books published. She gave herself two years to make it or give up on the idea. Her artist-mentor had recommended that she make contact with the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators. She discovered that the society awarded a grant each year to an artist for a picture book. Lily decided to try for that grant. She pulled out the illustrations she had made for her Utah State class, and in February 1989 she sent in the illustrated story *How the Ox Star Fell From Heaven* as her grant proposal. She didn’t win, but in June 1989, her confidence was given a big boost when she was notified that her work had received an honorable mention. Then in the fall of that year publishing company representatives called to tell her they had seen a list of contest winners and were interested in her work. Lily sent them her portfolio, and in December 1989 they called to ask if the manuscript for *Ox Star* were available. In January 1990 she received her first contract to write and illustrate a children’s book. When you read or hear other artists and authors describe their struggles to get a book published and hear how many of their manuscripts are rejected, you can probably understand why Lily was afraid to tell anyone about her contract.

The story of the ox star received a good deal of attention from children’s book reviewers. *School Library Journal* gave it a starred review; *Parenting* chose it as one of the ten best books of 1991; it was reviewed by the *Deseret News, New York Times*, and *Publisher’s Weekly*. Not bad for a debut into the world of children’s books! This showed that Lily’s contract was a matter of talent as well as luck. Lily volunteered that her two favorite illustrations in *Ox Star* are the scenes showing the farmers in their round hats lined up in the fields harvesting crops and the one at the very end with the mountains, night sky, and the oxen in a pond. She said these scenes brought back fond memories of the time she spent with the people of Taiwan.
Taken from *How the Ox Star Fell from Heaven*. ©1991 by Lily Toy Hong. Reprinted by permission from Albert Whitman & Company, Morton Grove, IL.
After her first book, Lily took time to marry her long-time friend, Kellan Hatch. She is now the mother of an eight-month-old, chubby-cheeked charmer named Evan. Lily was so busy getting married and moving that her publisher finally contacted her with a story and a question, "Would you be interested in illustrating this Chinese folktale?" Lily said she giggled all the way through *Two of Everything* (and so will you), and she consented to illustrate it. Hot off the press this year, *Two of Everything* has also received attention from critics. *Booklist* gave it a starred review in March; *Hornbook* starred it in August; and *School Library Journal* starred it in June. When I asked Lily how her parents feel about her art profession now, she smiled and said, "They are very pleased." In fact, her mother gives her valuable technical help on details related to traditional Chinese culture. For example, in the market scene (the second picture in *Two of Everything*), Lily portrayed the man at the back with the abacus doing his figuring with his left hand. Lily's mother told her that in China it would be considered bad to use your left hand. So Lily changed the illustration. This market scene is one of Lily’s favorites because she loves open markets. Don’t miss the scale being used by the man in the center. That scale belonged to Lily’s grandfather. Also, on the right-hand side is Mr. Haktak carrying a basket of vegetables. Hanging from the handle is a melon called a *fulogah* that can either be eaten stir-fried or dried like a gourd. Later in the book it’s used as a water bottle and as a vase. Don’t miss the old gold coins with holes in them. They were part of the family mementos handed down from Lily’s grandmother.

Lily loves to find out about traditional Chinese culture through folktales. She hopes that her books will give children the same gift she has received from illustrating these tales: a chance to learn about her parents’ way of life. As she explores more tales from China, she tries to visualize how she would present them in picture books. When asked how she evolved the rich but bold lines and the shapes and colors that make her style unique, she said she didn’t know. She sometimes looks at the ox star and wonders why she made him look the way she did. She has always loved shape, color, and line; and her style brought all these together. Lily Toy Hong’s books invite you to explore her heritage through colorful landscapes, delightful round-faced people, and strong lines. Be watching for more picture books from this talented artist.
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