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Global Perspectives: a Celebration of Children's Art and Imagination

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Abstract

The International Collection of Child Art is a resource comprised of more than 9,000 artworks created by children from 50 countries and cultures. The collection is housed and managed by Illinois State University's Milner Library as part of its Special Collections. This resource celebrates the creativity and innovative work produced by children with a global perspective. Thought provoking representations of whimsical animals, fanciful portraits, and musings on daily life provide a window for the viewer to share the often magical outlook of a child and gain a deeper understanding of a young artist's visual experience. The collection simultaneously provides a reflection of diversity and commonality as represented through the lens of visual culture.

This presentation discusses the collection's origins and history, the scope and contents of the collection, use of the artwork in the academic community for educational purposes and scholarly activity, and the role this visually rich collection plays in advancing the institutional commitment to provide access to an expansive universe of creative expression. The discussion also presents information about the ongoing digitization of the artwork and the active pursuit of developing partnerships with agencies to obtain external funding and support enhanced access to the collection, primarily through digitization, but also through increased exposure of the young artists' work via traveling exhibits.

Introduction

Visual representations of the world created by children from across cultures have the power to spark interdisciplinary dialogue and inquiries ultimately rooted in our curiosity and need to understand and discover a meaningful place in the world. As evidenced by the scholarly publications and researchers who have studied the artwork included in Milner Library's *International Collection of Child Art*, analysis of this resource spans a continuum exploring art making as a universal form of communication, visual expression as a method to study the stages of child development comparing culturally influenced characteristics, and even art as a means to understand a child's use of humor in conflict resolution (Perez 32; Klein 1). Interest generated from artwork created by children is a relevantly recent area of study dating to the 19th century (Cox 2). However, Dr. Jonathan Fineberg, Professor of Art History at the University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign, has written a compelling and comprehensive annotated chronology of children's art. Arcing back in time to the 13th century, Fineberg cites evidence produced from archeological excavations in Russia in 1980 which revealed fragments of drawings most likely originating from the hands of children (199). The chronology moves through the early 21st century noting the works of contemporary theorists of child art. Graphic representations of our world created by children move forward through time and continue to offer expansive territories of study for researchers and others who are drawn to the provocative visual expressions of young artists. Milner Library's *International Collection of Child Art* offers an international resource unique to library collections.

Illinois State University and Milner Library: A Brief Background

The International Collection of Child Art's (ICCA) origins and history are intertwined with the history of Illinois State University (ISU), an institution whose founding premise is rooted in education and diversity. A brief background of the University and Library which supports this valued collection provides a synopsis of an institution vested in teaching and learning. ISU, Illinois's first public university, is located in central Illinois approximately halfway between Chicago and St. Louis. Founded in 1857 as a State Normal School, ISU's primary mission was the education of teachers. The University, now a doctoral research intensive institution has grown to include six colleges offering 160 options to majors and minors. In the fall of 2007 the University enrolled over 20,000 students.

Illinois State University has a longstanding record of support for international engagement. A spectrum of activities demonstrates the University's engagement in the global community: study abroad programs for ISU students, opportunities for scholars from other countries to visit the campus, professional development for University faculty and staff engaged in international teaching, research and service activities. More than 400 international students from 65 countries currently attend ISU, reflecting the University's historic and ongoing commitment to the promotion of international studies and programs.

Milner Library supports the University's mission of promoting high academic standards by providing resources and services that promote an intellectually engaging environment to support learning and scholarship. Thirty faculty librarians and sixty civil service staff serve a bright and engaged student population. Additionally, 3,407 University employees, including 1,136 faculty are served by the library. In 2007 Milner Library's holdings numbered 1.6 million volumes. Milner Library is a member of the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois providing a network of support throughout the state and beyond. Milner Library promotes and provides a robust collection of print and electronic resources including almost 150 article databases, access to more than 3,800 print and electronic journals, digital image collections, and federated searching capabilities.

Milner Library's Special Collections and Rare Book Room holds approximately 40,000 volumes with a strong emphasis in the following areas: *Circus and Allied Arts Collection*, *Children's Literature Collection*, *The Lincoln Collection: Harold K. Sage*, *Lois Lenski Collection*, and the *International Collection of Child Art (ICCA)*. The ICCA is the collection this paper discusses.

International Collection of Child Art: Background and History

Dr. F. Louis Hoover, Illinois State University distinguished professor of art emeritus, and former University Museum Director, initiated the original children's art collection in the 1960s with over 3,000 artworks, the majority collected from public schools in the United States.



*"My Giant Bird" male, 7 years old, 18" x 24", painting on paper. United States.
Milner Library's International Collection of Child Art Traveling Exhibit: *For the Birds**

Under the direction of Dr. Barry Moore, emeritus professor of art, the resource of children's artworks grew to include the work of young artists from other countries. In the 1970s Dr. Moore developed liaison relationships with UNICEF and the Christian Children's Fund and the collection became a repository for international artworks donated from these organizations and others. Throughout this period the ICCA earned accreditation from the American Association of Museums and was part of ISU's University Museum collections. The collection grew to its current size and scope under the developmental direction of Dr. Moore. The University Museum closed in 1989 due to rescissions in the budget and the ICCA moved to the University's School of Art. The collection was stored in a classroom until the college could no longer accommodate the resource due to space constraints, lack of support staff, and less than optimal conditions for storing a collection of this size and educational value.

The Dean of University Libraries, Cheryl Elzy, recognized this collection of children's art appeared to be a superb match for the burgeoning concept of developing a Center for Children's Material Research. Taken into consideration was the potential for strong connections with the University's Department of English which offers a Ph.D. in English Studies with an emphasis in children's literature, one of the few institutions in the Midwest offering this degree. Additionally, ISU's College of Education has a comprehensive program in teacher education ranking as one of the top ten teacher preparation institutions in the nation among American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education institutions. The School of Art's Teacher Education program had already developed an ongoing relationship with the ICCA due to Dr. Moore's lengthy tenure in the department. Looking ahead to future opportunities to enhance and enrich the academic library environment, Dean Elzy sought and received support for significant space to house the collection. The ICCA became part of Milner Library's Special Collections in early 2000, sparing the collection from an undetermined future. Dr. Moore, retired since 1992, continues to serve the ICCA volunteering his time in an advisory role. The collection is presently managed and administered by the Art Librarian and author of this paper, Kathleen C. Lonbom.

Milner Library's acquisition of the collection of children's art is supported by the library's mission statement, which promotes the advancement of institutional commitment to provide access to a wide ranging collection of resources embracing multiple aspects of creative expression. Additionally, the Library's commitment to the collection of children's art acknowledges the broad and inclusive definition of literacy, reaching beyond the understanding and evaluation of the written word to include visual literacy.

The ICCA currently includes approximately 9,000 pieces of art from more than 50 countries and cultures spanning every continent with the exception of Antarctica. The artworks are two dimensional and use varied media: pencil and charcoal drawings, paintings on paper, crayon, tempera, and various printmaking techniques, created by artists ranging in age from 2-20. The collection is stored in an offsite university warehouse located two miles north of Milner Library.

The offsite storage location is not accessible to the public. Overall, the artwork is in good condition. In the mid 1970s the artworks were photographed and slides were created to support access, teaching, and study of the collection. The quality of the more than 30 year-old slides varies considerably; slide format does not provide easy or universal user access and no longer lends itself to using in presentation software. In 2003, about 400 slides were digitized for use on the ICCA website and to promote the traveling exhibits. The selected digitized images were then color corrected without digitization standards taken into consideration. A small number of these digitized images are available on the ICCA website (<http://www.library.ilstu.edu/icca/>). These images are used as graphics and are limited to thumbnail size. There is currently no image search functionality on the website. A searchable text only relational database contains a wealth of descriptive metadata for the collection including artist names, age, gender, title of work, country/culture of origin, and donor information. The Art Librarian has secured grant funding through the Friends of Milner Library to redesign and implement a website (summer 2008) that will serve as a gateway to the digitized image collection when funding is secured. Additionally, in 2006 the Friends of Milner Library supported a proposal to fund the creation of an informational brochure providing an educational overview detailing the collection's origins and its history, the scope and contents of the collection, and the traveling exhibits.

In addition to the more traditional acquisition methods used to collect children's artwork on an international level, oral history and fortuitous opportunities both play colorful roles in the documentation of how the children's art was gathered. Professor Emeritus Dr. Moore recalls the donation of children's art from Moscow was the result of a negotiated trade between the Director of the Rahr Museum, Joseph Hutchinson, Manitowoc, Wisconsin and a cast of individuals that included U.S. Intelligence and the Soviets. In the early 1970s Cold War climate this collection somehow passed through the ideological and physical barrier, then named the Iron Curtain, which divided post-WWII Europe. The Rahr Museum Director traded a substantial piece of metal (which landed unexpectedly in the streets of Manitowoc, purportedly a remnant of Sputnik, a series of Soviet earth orbiting satellites launched in the late 1950s) for the children's work from Moscow. The collection of works was donated to the ICCA when the Rahr Museum director retired. In a related story delineating unconventional collection methods Dr. Moore recounts a group of children's works from South America delivered via two candidates in ISU's Art Education Master's degree program, both nuns, who surreptitiously concealed the artwork in their garments to avoid the rigors of customs.



"A Fairy Tale." Female, age 11, Leningrad, Russia. Watercolor on paper, 53 x 43.
Milner Library's International Collection of Child Art

The ICCA continues to unfold and reveal itself through these anecdotal stories which speak of how the children's artworks melded together to form a collection through a varied and vast network of connections, some planned, others serendipitously happenstance. The images communicate through a quiet and yet resolute and spirited presence. Similar in spirit, yet much

larger and comprehensive in scope and purpose is the International Museum of Children's Art located in Oslo, Norway, founded by Rafael Goldin in 1986. In this special museum setting, the roles of child and adult are deliberately reversed. Adults, who most often fall into the position of teacher, find their roles eclipsed by the captivating art in an environment saturated with the young artists' aesthetics and vision (Goldin 165).

Threaded throughout the collection are descriptive written records from the children who created the artwork offering a glimpse of related information from the young artist's world. What is not uncovered in the image, its title, gender of the artist, or time and place of the artwork, might be found in the words from the artist. Selected groups of work have accompanying written documentation provided by the artists or the donor offering another window to understand the work at hand. Grant funding has recently secured from the University's Research Grant program to hire an assistant to transcribe available commentary and other details from the paper files of the ICCA. Many of the comments gathered from children exist only on paper and their words have never been entered in a searchable database.



Singing of Peace. female, 13 years old, Vietnam, 1972, painting, 15 x 12
Milner Library's International Collection of Child Art traveling exhibit: *Spatial Relations by Children*
Artist's comment: "The children are singing and dancing because peace has returned..."

The accompanying additional commentary will enhance the artworks' descriptive metadata available to researchers and also potentially provide illuminating context for the image. Additionally, any undocumented information that can be gleaned from the paper files will be transcribed. Transcriptions of the commentary, and other pieces of the ICCA history, will be

entered into a spreadsheet and will be ready to be uploaded into the ICCA image database and website when it becomes available. Although the anecdotal stories that surround the collection have contributed to a colorful past, the library seeks to assure the history of the collection is documented accurately and that information is accessible to researchers.

Traveling exhibits from the collection

Exhibits from the *International Collection of Child Art* have been displayed both nationally and internationally, from the Children's Discovery Museum, Normal, Illinois to the Hong Kong Museum of Art. Eighteen traveling exhibits are available to be borrowed for display and serve as ebullient and educational emissaries for the entire collection. Each exhibit includes 20-30 pieces of art which are framed and ready for hanging. The exhibits have been borrowed by libraries, universities, hospitals, theatres, art galleries, and museums. Progressional themes, such as the development of spatial relations or the development of the figure concept in children's art, are examined in several of the traveling exhibits curated by Dr. Moore. Other exhibits highlight children's depictions of animals, birds, holidays, or games across cultures. Milner Library regularly exhibits artwork from the collection in an open display area on the library's main floor. Three exhibits, with a theme of "Fun, Sports, and Games" were developed and displayed at the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York. The exhibits were again displayed at Soldier Field in Chicago during the World Cup games in 1994. This summer, the Fun, Sports, and Games exhibit will travel to the Ela Area Public Library, Lake Zurich, Illinois, where the artwork will supplement the library's summer reading program "Get in the Game, Read!"



"Playing" female, 12 years old, 26" x 40", multicolored drawing on paper. Jamaica.
International Collection of Child Art Traveling Exhibit: *Fun, Sports, & Games I*

Research and Education

The *International Collection of Child Art* has served multiple audiences in its almost forty year history, including student researchers, academic scholars from across disciplines, and a wider public interested in viewing, learning about, and appreciating the imaginative vision that shapes a child's creative pursuits. The collection provides a wealth of primary source materials for a range of researchers including art educators, elementary educators, children's literature and graphics, child psychologists, and anthropologists. The collection is available to the academic community for research, teaching, and curriculum support. Educators from primary, secondary, and higher education institutions have used the collection as a primary source for researching cross cultural differences and similarities in childhood development among children. The ICCA has a long standing relationship with scholars and researchers of children's art and art education. Images from the collection have been published in multiple editions of textbooks, essays, and dissertations.

Selected publications including ICCA images:

- Anderson, Frances E. *Art for All the Children: Approaches to Art Therapy for Children With Disabilities* 2nd ed. Springfield, Ill.: C.C. Thomas, 1992.
- Anderson, Frances E. *Art for All the Children: a Creative Sourcebook for the Impaired Child*. Springfield, Ill.: Thomas, 1978.
- Hobbs, Jack A., Jean C. Rush. *Teaching Children Art*. Waveland Press, Long Grove, Ill, 2006 .
- Klein, Sheri. "Rockets to Rainbows: Humor as Conflict Resolution in Child Art." *Intercom: Indiana Center on Global Change and World Peace*. Autumn 1992: 1-5.
- McFee, June King and Rogena M. Degge. *Art, Culture, and Environment : A Catalyst For Teaching*. Dubuque, Iowa : Kendall/Hunt Pub. Co.:1980.
- Moore, Barry E. and Richard A. Salome, *Children's Art* [filmstrip], Chicago : International Film Bureau, Inc., 1979.
- Perez, Jeannine. *A Cross-National Study of Child Art:Comparing for Universal and Culturally Influenced Characteristics*. Diss. Illinois State University, 1993.
- Wachowiak, Frank and Robert D. Clements. *Emphasis Art : A Qualitative Art Program for Elementary and Middle Schools*. 8th ed. Boston, MA: Pearson/Allyn and Bacon, 2006.



We and Our Instructor, female, 10 years of age, Romania
Milner Library's International Collection of Child Art

ISU School of Art's Art Education faculty have incorporated artwork from the ICCA into curriculum for Art Education, Elementary Education, and Early Childhood Education, serving as a valued primary source in multiple classes designed to educate future primary and elementary teachers of the visual arts. The collection also provides a rich potential for study by researchers of children's literature and graphics. ISU Department of English faculty use the artwork for curriculum support in Childhood Literature. Professor Jan Susina, who teaches a Literature for Young Children course, incorporates assignments into his classes asking his students to view and analyze current exhibitions from the collection when they are available for display. Professor Roberta Trites, Immediate Past President of the Children's Literature Association (ChLA) has worked with Milner Library to incorporate artwork from the collection into the annual international conference being hosted by ISU in June, 2008. ICCA artwork is featured on the conference website and is also used in the graphics for the program. Professor Trites has noted the interest generated about the collection from scholars of graphic arts and picture books who will be attending the conference. Milner Library will display a collection of Romanian works from the collection for a premier exhibit in conjunction with the ChLA conference. Educators have noted use in the classroom would grow exponentially if the collection were fully digitized and available online.

A grant secured during spring semester 2008 from ISU's Research and Sponsored Programs has provided funding for the digitization of a selected group of 100 artworks from the ICCA created

by German children in the mid 20th century. Securing funding for this subset of the collection has provided an opportunity for the Art Librarian to work collaboratively with Illinois State University's Digitization Center and Milner Library's Metadata Librarian to initiate a workflow that will facilitate digitizing the entire collection when additional grant funding is awarded. The Digitization Center has scanned and digitized the artworks. The Metadata Librarian has worked with the Art Librarian to create a metadata schema for the digital collection software program that is appropriate for this collection.



"Untitled" male, 19 years old, 25" x 34", Water based painting. Germany.
Milner Library's International Collection of Child Art

Digitization of the collection

The previous digitization of a selected number of slides, although not high quality, has contributed to bringing attention about the collection to a new generation of users who are accustomed to innovative use of technology and electronic access. Educators from various disciplines, librarians, and the general public have made repeated requests for increased electronic access to the artworks. Institutions borrowing the exhibits frequently ask for electronic access to the images so they can more broadly share and enhance the viewer's experience with this collection.

The focus and challenge of the near future is finding support to accomplish the digital conversion of the ICCA so it may be more broadly shared, appreciated, and studied. It should be noted however, the digitization of the collection is not meant to replace the original artworks, but to provide electronic access to a global audience. In May, Milner Library's Art Librarian submitted a grant proposal to the Illinois State Library's Library Services and Technology Act grant program funded through the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services. The fiscal year 2009 grant cycle is emphasizing the digitization of significant special collections. If the digitization of the ICCA is funded through this grant opportunity, the project will begin in October 2008 and the digital files and their associated metadata records created will be available globally through the Illinois Digital Archives (<http://www.idaillinois.org/>) and will also be hosted from Milner Library's Digital Collections page (<http://tempest.lib.ilstu.edu/>), and the soon to be redesigned ICCA website. When digitized completely, the *International Collection of Child Art* will facilitate information discovery and access to a culturally expansive resource.

The seeds of this inspiring collection were sewn with creative works by the children of Illinois, and branched out to extend its scope and reach to young artists from around the world. The collection has remained firmly rooted in Illinois through the support of Milner Library and Illinois State University. If funding is secured for digitization, the artwork will be available to the global community. Digitizing this valuable and unique resource of children's original artwork will provide rich primary sources to students, researchers, educators, and the public at large, collectively enhancing viewers' cross-cultural knowledge of children, their creativity, their expressed need for art, and the value of education in their lives.

Works Cited

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