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Mary Blair

Emma Brooks

Kutztown University of Pennsylvania

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Emma Brooks

Design Pioneers – Mary Blair

October 5, 2015

Mary Blair was one of the few women who played an important role in the history of animation. In the 1950's, she was in a field dominated by men, but one man in particular saw great promise and potential in Blair's whimsical and unique style, Walt Disney. Blair work on three Disney classics, *Cinderella*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *Peter Pan*. She maintained a professional relationship with Walt Disney after she left to pursue freelance endeavors. Blair worked with him again for one last time with the *It's a Small World* attraction at Disneyland. Mary Blair's illustrations created fantasy environments that were magical and foresighted; making her beyond her time as a female design pioneer.

Mary Blair's Early Life

Mary Blair was born Mary Brown Robinson on October 21, 1911, in McAlester, Oklahoma. By age seven, her parents uprooted the family to Morgan Hill, California near San Jose. At an early age, Mary developed her artistic skill and at 20 she pursued her career as an illustrator. She was awarded a scholarship at the Chouninard School of Art in Los Angeles, where she met her future husband Lee Blair.

The pair pursued fine arts working with watercolor. Mary proved to be a stellar student and demonstrated great promise. In 1932, she won first prize at an applied arts competition for her design of a Trojan horse printed on Cannon towel products

(Canemaker 2). Mary and Lee married in 1934 and they were ready to take on the world with their paintings. Lee was a very serious artist who focused on the fine arts.

The Blairs agreed to dedicate themselves and their lives together as fine artists. They both mastered the California School watercolor style of large, free brushstrokes and rich, bold color. They painted scenes of everyday life on the West Coast with no pencil sketching. Their body of work at the time was described as lively and strong compositions.

The Blairs were gaining recognition as watercolor painters, but it wasn't enough to pay the bills. The Great Depression was not only hard for everyone, but Mary and Lee struggled to live by selling their artwork. They soon found practical low-level jobs at an animation studio called UB Iwerks. Lee was an in-between assistant animator and Mary painted character cells. Both Mary and Lee believed that these jobs were beneath them but they also needed to survive. Lee left UB Iwerks for better pay at Harman-Ising studio as a color director. This allowed Mary to stay home and paint. Soon after working there, Lee left Harman-Ising for Disney in May 1938. He went on to be the color director on *Pinocchio* and *Fantasia*. By 1940 Lee pushed Mary to sketch for Walt Disney, even though Mary had no desire to have a career in the animation industry (Canemaker 4).

Within the first moments of looking at Mary Blair's work, Walt Disney saw the potential and they soon formed a professional relationship. Blair's visions soon became a staple for Disney sets, costumes, and characters in productions. Walt Disney fell in love with the warmth and accessibility of Blair's palette. He knew her designs would be commercially successful. Blair was intuitive about the audience, which made her success

at Disney Studios popular. Her illustrative designs referenced early American folk art but with a modern sensibility, way ahead of her time (Gormley 31).

She worked closely with Walt Disney and earned sixty dollars a week. She became a conceptual artist for Disney Animation Studios. At first, Mary struggled with developing her unique illustrative style. As she experimented with styles and techniques she began to mimic Disney Art Directors, Joe Gran and Sylvia Holland (Canemaker 12). Blair soon found her own unique illustrative style after traveling to South America.

Shortly after being hired by Walt Disney, the Blairs and several other studio artists accompanied Walt and his wife to South America. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy allowed artists to travel and promote art and culture. Disney's group traveled all over Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Guatemala and Mexico in three months (Canemaker 13). Mary had the experience of a lifetime. She began to paint her interpretations of rhythm, color, music and the people. She met musicians, poets, and painters; she immersed herself in the culture. The most valuable lesson Blair learned and applied to her work was how to capture an experience by how it felt rather than what it looked like. Blair soul-searched and developed her personal and memorable style.

The change after travelling in her work aesthetic was quite noticeable from her previous watercolors. She now began primarily working in gouache. She translated real-life observations into shapes and playful forms to capture the spirit of movement (Canemaker 16). Her compositions became whimsical and more dynamic. Her paintings evolved into a strong narrative that Disney could see. He believed her conceptual art translated easily into sets for animation.

Walt Disney loved Mary's receptivity to translating characters and story sets through her gouache paintings. Her paintings were bright and bold. She took chances with her palette, which always worked. She often painted over black to create vibrant backdrops. She had great gouache techniques working with transparencies. She created lively, imaginative silhouettes. There was a child-like wonder and quality to her work, which impressed Disney. Shapes were loose, free and filled with spontaneity making it apparent that she painted in the moment; she quickly became one of Walt Disney's favorite artists.

Mary Blair gained great admiration from Disney. Her style was different compared to nostalgic styles of Norman Rockwell and Edward Hopper, popular at this time. Her contemporaries were realists and she was colorful. Disney appreciated her modernist approach as she embraced bold colors, abstracted shapes, and embellished characters (Gaylord 2). Her style was simple yet had great craftsmanship and sophistication with her color and compositions. She looked at projects as a whole art form and set up the mood and style of the animated film. Scenery and characters were well balanced and could translate easily to animation.

Mary Blair as a Disney Art Director

By 1942, Mary Blair's concepts were put into action, as she became Art Director for Disney's short animation of *Johnny Appleseed*. Her husband joined the Navy during World War II and was stationed in Washington DC. Mary split her time between working for Disney in California and living with her husband in Maryland. With her new position as Art Director, she was in charge of interpreting the script and creating the conceptual sketches to inspire the animators. She was influenced by artist such as Thomas Hart

Benton and his colorful landscapes (Canemaker 22). She created scenery for *Johnny Appleseed* in her unique style that led to her important contributions to Disney Productions.

The next big production she lent her skills to was the live action film, *Song of the South* that also included animation sequences (Canemaker 23). Blair spent a weekend in rural Georgia researching locations, much like she did during her visit to South America. She looked at cotton and cornfields, plantation mansions, and sunsets for inspiration (Canemaker 28). Primitive folk art influenced her unique style for this project. Walt Disney even approached Blair to sketch costumes and sets for the live action film. Mary Blair perfected her style at this time and soon began to work on three of Disney's most beloved classics, *Cinderella*, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Peter Pan*.

Mary Blair's Big Three with Disney

By 1946, Lee Blair did not return to Disney after his service so as to not compete with his wife. Instead he started his own company, Film/TV Graphics Inc. in New York City. Mary, at 35, became pregnant with the couple's first child. They moved to Great Neck, Long Island to start their family. In 1950, the couple welcomed their second son (Canemaker 38). Walt Disney was still in contact with Mary and wanted her to continue her conceptual work for his upcoming feature, *Cinderella*. Disney was willing to work with her by either Walt Disney traveling to New York or Blair traveling to Los Angeles. Disney, a family man, accommodated Mary's schedule. He knew her style was valuable to the Disney Animation Studio sensibility.

Mary Blair was a first level conceptual artist for the overall feature of *Cinderella*. The clear and simple shapes of her preliminary gouache paintings emphasized the magic

of the film (Soloman 53). The visual styling of the film was entirely Blair's basic look and her strong color choices. She interpreted the French countryside and adjusted it for imaginative purposes (Soloman 76). Her original sketches of chambers and staircases made the scenery grander than real life (Canemaker 38). She played with mood and emotional color. Blair developed the character, Cinderella by creating scenes of her everyday life to better understand her character (Canemaker 38). Blair worked on the character, Lady Tremine and her facial expressions that were later translated for the final film. She also illustrated the absurd stepsisters with their costumes and signature color palettes (Soloman 61). She even worked on costume design, but those ideas never made it into film. Blair's sense of romantic color and fantasy is seen throughout the final film (Soloman 77). Marc Davis, another conceptual artist believed that:

“This woman was [an] extraordinary artist who spent most of her life being misunderstood. All the men that were there at Disney, their design was based on perspective. Mary did things on marvelous flat planes. Walt appreciated this and wanted to see this, but he, not being an artist himself, was never able to instruct the men on how to use this... it was tragic because she did things that were so marvelous and never got on the screen.

The next animated film Blair worked on a second attempted to get more of her artwork translated into film, was *Alice in Wonderland*.

Blair's visual style and influence was heavily seen in Disney's *Alice in Wonderland*. She worked on dozens of paintings in gouache for different scenes, such as the “March of the Cards”. Blair displayed strong dynamic staging for the choreography of the “march” and color. Her subtle design sensibility can be seen in the background of

settings, props, and shrubbery (Canemaker 50). Her technique of painting on black to have more vibrant colors was used in the scenes of Tulgey Wood and the Mad Hatter's Tea Party. Colors and shapes popped out with light and shadow, which added dynamically to the scene. *Wonderland* flowers were brilliant with emotional color, and filled with rhythm (Canemaker 54). Layers of transparent shapes formed the imagery of the offbeat and whimsy of *Wonderland*. She continued these visions and techniques in her final animated film, Disney's *Peter Pan*.

With *Peter Pan*, Mary continued to be a creative genius. Her concepts translated into the film with the fanciful scenery of Neverland: fairies and pixie dust, pirates, the Lost Boys and mermaids were at her imaginative disposal. She worked with more dramatic color than in her first two animated films. Disney continued to approve of her backgrounds and stylization of flat silhouette shapes. Her sketches showed her mastery of dramatic lighting. Moonlighting and haziness were captured in her conceptual paintings (Canemaker 56). Blair definitely left her mark at Disney Animation Studios, but it was time for her to move on.

Decision to Leave Disney Studios for Freelancing

Mary Blair revealed to Walt Disney that *Peter Pan* would be her final film with the company. She wanted to remain in New York with her family and wanted to freelance. She left on good terms with Walt Disney. They continued their professional relationship by communicating via letters. Walt completely understood Mary putting her family first since her older son was having some mental health issues. Freelancing led to a variety of new opportunities for Blair.

By 1953, Blair began freelancing with Golden Books to do children's book illustrations. Her style morphed for a younger audience and created her signature "Mary Blair Child" style. These illustrated children had a simplified round face, and rosy cheeks. Her flat simple shapes and bright color palette continued throughout her "children." Blair completed *I Can Fly* Little Golden Book, and with great commercial success, it led her to other freelancing work. She even worked on commercial children's Golden Books with the Disney Company. She caught the imagination of children.

Advertisements and holiday cards used the look of the "Mary Blair Child". Blair's dynamic interaction of colors straight from the painting tube translated well to advertisements for everyday products like with Maxwell House Coffee, and Dutch Boy Paints. Baker's Instant, and Meadow Gold brands used similar to those characters from her *I Can Fly* book.

In 1955, Mary went back to her roots as a conceptual artist for a Broadway production. *Cole Black and the Seven Dwarfs*. It was never put into production, but Blair worked on set and costume design. She challenged the composition of the stage set along with rich and intense color. She painted the atmosphere within a scene and mastered a new approach and new heights planning a three dimensional stage (Canemaker 80). Gaining knowledge from this experience lead to a new exciting project that Walt Disney wanted to propose to Mary Blair.

It's a Small World

It was always clear that Mary Blair was one of Walt Disney's favorite artists. In 1963, he enticed her to return to design the 1964 New York World's fair attraction for the United Nation's Children's Fund (Jones 1). Disney knew she was the right artist to tackle

the challenge of a boat ride sailing through the children of the world. The ride became *It's a Small World* with a catchy theme song. She designed children from around the world in their environments. Her work became more experimental with detailed collages, assembled with transparencies of cellophane and acrylic paint (Canemaker 86). Blair also used geometric and organic shapes; she even became more of a master with color combinations and simplified color palettes. Karal Ann Marling compared Blair's style to "Frank Lloyd Wright marrying Andy Warhol". Blair tackled the project as small round theater production with audience, and insisted that the performers move (Canemaker 86). Blair was finally being challenged far what beyond she was accustomed to during her years with freelance. Rolly Crump helped Blair's two-dimensional work be translated into three-dimensions. Marc Davis, another Disney Studio conceptual artist, worked on the costuming for the international dolls along the ride (Jone 1). *It's a Small World* moved to Disneyland in 1966 and Walt Disney World in 1971.

Once *It's a Small Word* moved to Disney theme parks, Mary worked on ceramic murals for the park's rides such as Tomorrowland and the Contemporary Resort at Disney World. The Tomorrowland mural was similar to *It's a Small World* ride with children around what Blair portrayed as energy (Canemaker 96). The Contemporary Resort was inspired by the Grand Canyon with warm colors of the dessert and Native American symbolism in her style. The mural was completed by 1971 and Mary was in awe with the final piece (Canemaker 96). Blair loved the ceramic tile process, with the rich color, that don't fade and the glistening the qualities of the tile glazes.

By the 1970's, Mary Blair and her family suffered many personal problems causing them to move to northern California. Lee's business began to fail, and her eldest

son was going through mental health issues. Lee was jealous of Mary's mainstream success. They both resonated with guilt, stemming from their abandonment of their life goal of being fine artists. Both suffered guilt for selling out for financial security (Canemaker 98). Both Mary and Lee were alcoholics, and their addiction became progressively worse at this time. She was a functional alcoholic but she began to struggle with poor vision. She was distraught over Walt Disney's death in 1966. She knew once he passed she would not be hired back to do conceptual work by Disney Studios (Canemaker 99). In 1975, Mary Blair gradually withdrew and watched television and drank all day. She had alcoholic dementia after years of drinking. Blair would occasionally paint, but the work was lacking her strong, unique style of the past. On July 26, 1978, Mary Blair died of a cerebral hemorrhage, Lee scattered her ashes from a sailboat in the Pacific Ocean.

Mary Blair left a formidable legacy at Disney Studios. There are many adaptations of her work throughout the Disney parks and in Disney's current films. She influenced many women in the animation industry and many credit her for their inspiration. She continues to inspire new generations of designers, illustrators, and computer artists. At some point in every Disney production, the artists go through a phase of looking at Mary Blair's work, according to Pete Docter, a Disney director. Two of Disney's modern classics, *Tangled* and Disney/Pixar's *Up* have accredited her as sole creative inspiration.

Tangled is an adaptation of the classic fairytale, Rapunzel. During production, conceptual artists looked at another Disney fairytale classic, *Cinderella*. Shapes and whimsy created by Blair were dissected and used for *Tangled's* scenery (Kurtti 35). Blair's romantic visual styles were organically translated to this new classic. Blair's

Cinderella influenced lighting and visual studies. Blair's development her bright, cheerful, saturated and dramatic color was used to inspire the darker, scarier moments (Kurtti 29). Directors knew the importance of creating classic fantasy worlds as imagined by Mary Blair. *Tangled* played homage to Disney classics and will be a true fairytale remembered for years to come.

Disney and Pixar's *Up*, is a story of adventure. This visual and emotional film depicts senior citizen and widower, Carl Frederickson as he maintains his promise to his wife by traveling to Paradise Falls. He rides a floating house in the air with thousands of balloons. Paradise Falls is located in South America, and director Pete Docter wanted a certain degree of whimsy. Characters of the film are broken down into simple shapes very similar to what Mary Blair did. Artists continued to push the boundaries of shapes creating a "simplicity" (Hauser 18). Docter stated that the film was "more inspired by the graphic design paintings of Mary Blair than by any photo references" (Gaylord 2). Her vibrant and bold colors are seen throughout the film. Shapes are graphic yet loose and flowing much like Blair's work. Mary Blair inspired today's animation films by inspiring the visual artists themselves.

Blair has influenced other female conceptual artists hired by Disney Studios. A collection of the current female Disney artists who work there today admire Blair's work Lorelay Bove, Brittney Lee, and Victoria Ying are among the Disney artists who recognize the contribution of Mary Blair. They work in the imagining field much like Mary did (Ying 7). Bove has worked on *Princess and Frog*, *Tangled*, *Wreck it Ralph*, and *Frozen*. Just like Blair, Bove creates her studies in gouache. She paints quickly to get her idea down (Ying 11). Brittney Lee is best known for her work on *Frozen*. Lee's personal

works of cut paper reflect Blair's sense of shapes and color. Her fascination is movement and she tries to capture rhythm in her compositions (Ying 93). There is a very retro feel to the layers built in her work, much like Blair's. Blair's other protégé is conceptual artist, Victoria Ying who has been inspired by Mary's paintings. Though Ying primarily works with the computer, there is still of sense of Blair in her work (Ying 111). Ying works with femme fatales and her lighter fare work is whimsical and unique. Her concept work shows compositions of unlikely color combinations, just like Mary. These three artists attribute their inspiration to Blair's legacy and work.

Mary Blair was a designer ahead of her time. She was a true pioneer and Walt saw that in the modernism of her work. She was a master of color, composition and movement, which emphasized the magic of the classic animated films. She is timeless and essence of child-like wonder will always captivate new audiences. She left an inspiring legacy at Disney Studios.

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