Disney's European Sources

Robin Allan

"It all started with a mouse."

This exhibition is a testament to the art of the golden age of Disney animation, and demonstrates how Disney and his artists were attracted to Europe for inspiration. It shows how the old and the new interleave and feed upon each other in the realms of painting, literature, illustration, the cinema and music. Much of the power and strength of the Disney empire today rests on the films that Walt Disney personally supervised during his lifetime, and the exhibition therefore limits itself to a study of those animated films from Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937) to The Jungle Book (1967).

As we draw further away from the original release date of these films (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs is nearly seventy years old), what strikes the viewer is their visual density, in addition to their narrative drive, dramatic thrust and character delineation. There are layered textures of Art Nouveau, Art Deco and nineteenth-century academic art, as well the Golden Age of book illustration and the cinema itself, which have prompted an examination of the artistic influences emanating from Europe which form the background to so many of Disney's animated feature films. Fourteen out of seventeen of these films have their origins in Europe. Aesthetic, cultural, socio-political, and feminist attacks upon all aspects of Disney pr
literate, but the films continue to exert their popularity, their layered richness proclaiming their classic status as the twentieth century fades into history.

The Golden Age of Disney animation can be said to begin with the Mickey Mouse short cartoons from 1928 onwards and the Silly Symphonies which began in 1929 and continued throughout the 1930s. Then began the astonishing oeuvre of the late 1930s and early 1940s, starting with Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), Pinocchio and Fantasia (both 1940), Dumbo (1941) and Bambi (1942). The war years interrupted the flow of creativity, though much interesting work was achieved; it was not until 1950, with the release of Cinderella, the first full-length animated feature since Bambi, that a new Silver Age of Disney animation began. There was a return to European sources, though without the European artists who had worked with Disney on the earlier features.

Did it all start with a mouse? Well, not exactly, but it did start with animals. Walt Disney (1901–1966) was born in Chicago and spent most of his life in cities, though his formative years between 1906 and 1911 were spent on a farm in Marceline, Missouri. The boy Disney loved farm life and animals; years later he wrote to the town on its golden jubilee and noted:

More things of importance happened to me in Marceline than have happened since—or are likely to in the future. Things, I mean like experiencing my first country life, seeing my first circus parade, attending my first school, seeing my first motion picture! Everything connected with Marceline was a thrill to us, coming as we did from a city the size of Chicago.  

The popular culture of the day attracted the young Disney, whose education was limited. He loved vaudeville, the cinema, circuses and the comic strips that proliferated in newspapers everywhere. He loved music and was passionately devoted to trains. The importance of Marceline as the foundation upon which the veneer of European sources is overlaid in the Disney canon, cannot be overemphasized. Disney and the Disney family returned to the town in later years and it remains unspoilt and unexploited, proud of its famous boyhood inhabitant but protective of its independent spirit.

Returning to the United States after the First World War in 1919 from service as an ambulance driver in France, Disney started producing animated cartoons with his friend Ub Iwerks, son of a Dutch immigrant, in Kansas City. Seven out of eight of Disney’s first cartoon films were based on European fairy or folk tales.

After settling in Los Angeles he produced the Alice Comedies (from 1923), in which a live-action little girl encounters cartoon animals; as the series developed the animated areas took over from the real world of live action. Fascinated by technology, Disney realised that the power of sound wedded to the animated image would enhance the value of his product, and his first sound Mickey Mouse cartoon Steamboat Willie of 1928 (though not the first mouse film to be made, which was Plane Crazy), was a sensation. At first Mickey's world is a rural one, with 'nature red in tooth and claw'. Mickey makes a violin out of a cat in Steamboat Willie, and he hangs on to a cow's udder when she becomes airborne in Plane Crazy. The gags are swift, the pace relentless and with a narrative drive that would set Disney apart from his rivals in the animation business. There are echoes, too, of the comic strip; one of the most famous strips of the period, The Katzenjammer Kids, had been instituted in 1897 by William Randolph Hearst after his European visit, where he had seen picture stories of the naughty boys Max und Moritz, drawn by the German artist Wilhelm Busch (1832–1908). Although there is no direct link between Busch and Disney, his work was known by the artists who worked on Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, and there are parallels between the German artist and the American; like Disney’s, the world of Busch is a rural one, his characters and situations are rural, his landscape is rural, his spirit is rural. Everything that is contemporary in his strips is modern, and yet the events that take place are timeless, the same events happen over and over again.
ations rooted in a popular tradition of peasant and lower bourgeois culture. The early Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck echo Busch’s harsh conflict between safe and repressive authority and the yearning for self-assertion.

Another link with Busch lies in the folk tale, which Disney also depicts. Just as Disney looked back to a rural past in his films, so Busch and his contemporaries like Ludwig Richter (1803–1884) looked back to a sentimentalized Golden Age of pre-industrialised rural Germany, exemplified in Romantic painting and decoration. This nostalgic movement, cozy, snug, genial, applies to much of Disney, since he used realism to promote nostalgia for a romanticized past.
Anthropomorphism

Disney's use of anthropomorphized animals begins with his Alice comedies, in which the creatures are at first subservient to the live-action heroine in a largely live-action world, but tend to dominate the screen as the series develops. These animals, and then Oswald the Rabbit, Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and the Disney gang of creatures who followed, are all direct descendants of the European anthropomorphized creatures from stories, oral tales, illustrated books and magazines. The impulse to relate to the animal world is an old one and, as the French writer Lo Duca has pointed out, is recorded in ancient cave paintings and in Egyptian hieroglyphics. Animals that talk and comment or complement the foibles and follies of humankind have been part of our oral and literary tradition for thousands of years. Aesop (c. 6th century BC) has been illustrated many times, and the French artist Ernest Griset (1843–1907) made some charming pictures for a late 19th-century edition of the Fables.

Griset was influenced by his fellow countryman, the tragically short-lived Grandville (1803–1847) whose real name was Jean Ignace-Isadore Gerard. Grandville's drawings of animals and insects engaged in human activity influenced not only Griset but also the English illustrators John Tenniel (1829–1914) and Edward Lear (1812–1888). Although Lear produced more than 200 poems and caricatures that are considered the first English animal anthologies, his drawings never reached the level of success of the French masters. 

Charles Cristodoro and Duke Russell (??) // Jiminy Cricket leaning on his umbrella, study model // Painted plaster, Burbank, California, Walt Disney Feature Animation and the Animation Research Library.
(1812–1888), and later still the Polish animator Ladislaw Starewicz (1882–1965), who worked in Moscow and Paris. As humanity has become less dependent on animals for its day-to-day life, and as animals have become more remote from humanity, so the anthropomorphic impulse has grown, from Beatrix Potter (1866–1943) with her practical mice and rabbits, to Kermit the Frog in the 1980s. The impulse flourished in Germany, especially with the work of Heinrich Kley (1863–1945), whose pictures of dancing hippos and elephants were collected personally by Disney, and whose work influenced The Dance of the Hours section of Fantasia in particular. T.S. Sullivant’s cartoons of cavorting animals were popular in America. The impulse flourished also in France with the work of two artists admired by Disney and his associates; the first was Daumier and the second Dore. Honoré Daumier (1808–1879) was acknowledged by the Disney artists as one of the painters that they most admired. His ability to caricature society and to exaggerate with line and mass appealed to the caricaturist in Disney. His dancing line, febrile organisation of light and shade and his visual comment on human behaviour were noted by the artists who were to work on Disney’s feature films. The sense of loss, banishment from home and homeland, expressed in his Emigration (1856) is tragically poignant. Dogs are being exiled from their mother country, their tails between their legs, their expressions of utter misery is universal. Their fates are different: some are carried away, others are returned and a few are left behind.
Cinderella, Gus and Jaq in a teacup, sequence 51, scene 28
1950, production background, celluloid, gouache, Burbank, California, Walt Disney
Feature Animation and the Animation Research Library
their legs and at the frontier one dog rises to its hind legs and looks back with an air of despair and pain, one paw clutching possessions on a stick, and the other clenched in anger and grief. Behind this upright figure creep the other dogs, a mass movement. The horizontal and vertical planes are contrasted; the upright dog and the solid vertical post with its “Frontière” board are static, while the mass of fleeing dogs form the horizontal body of the picture. Movement is expressed by Daumier through these contrasts of stillness and animation.

The popularity of Gustave Doré (1832–1883) throughout Europe and the United States was—and is—incredible. His work was accessible through popular editions of his illustrations for Dante, Cervantes, Coleridge, Rabelais, La Fontaine, and the Bible, among many others. He was by turns dramatic, romantic, florid, and his pictures invited the viewer to enter his imaginative worlds. He was prolific; his work was instantly recognizable and he was a gifted story teller in pictures, just as Disney would become gifted in story-telling through moving pictures. Doré was born and brought up in Strasbourg, and, though French, his early life was spent close to Germany and the Black Forest, whose brooding darkness stimulated his imagination. His illustrations for La Fontaine’s Fables show his mastery of dramatic effect, with figures dwarfed by mighty trees; in Rabelais, Dante, and Ariosto
Cinderella, the Mice make a dress for Cinderella, sequence 2.3, scene 38
1950, production background, cel, celluleid, gouache, Burbank, California, Walt Disney Feature Animation and the Animation Research Library.
his natural world is anthropomorphized till trees and plants take on their own dramatic and sometimes alarming life. In Disney, too, the trees come to life as the terrified Snow White flees through the forest, believing in her fear that all nature is against her. There is a reminder here of Doré’s illustrations for Dante’s *Inferno*, where Dante and Virgil encounter the trees of the suicides. William Blake (1757–1827) also illustrated Dante, and Arthur Rackham’s anthropomorphized trees occur again and again in his macabre illustrations to fairy tales and European classics. Rackham (1867–1939) was well known to the Disney artists, and there were many of his illustrated books in the Disney library. There is an apocryphal story that he planned to go to the Disney Studio to work on *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, but that he was too frail to make the journey to the United States. The French cartoonist Benjamin Rabier (active c.1900), like Doré and Rackham before him, also illustrated trees and plants that came alive. Theodor Kittelsen (1857–1914), the Norwegian artist, even anthropomorphized the mountains and fields of his homeland.

A workaholic like Disney, Doré’s interest in the dramatic, macabre, comic, and fantastic, expressed itself in over a hundred illustrated books and literally thousands of drawings. His charismatic personality and atelier attracted the fashionable just
Honore Daumier
L'Ours du Nord le plus desagreable de tous
les our les connus [The polar bear,
the most disagreeable of all known bears],
in Charivari of April 17–18, 1854
Lithograph, Los Angeles, Armand Hammer
Daumier and Contemporaries Collection,
Gift of Dr. Armand Hammer,
Hammer Museum

Emmanuel Fremiet
Ours mendiant [Begging bear]
Bronze, private collection

The Jungle Book, Baloo and King Louie
fighting over Mowgli, sequence 6, scene 212
1967, production background, celluloid,
gouache, Burbank, California,
Walt Disney Feature Animation
and the Animation Research Library
as Walt Disney and his studio would attract artists and the world of fashion eighty years later. Doré’s technically brilliant, often vulgar and melodramatic work appealed to Disney and his artists, for whom comedy, violence, and the macabre were easily juxtaposed, and many of Doré’s illustrated books were in the Disney Studio library—and they were often borrowed.3

Like Doré and Grandville, Disney picked up the anthropomorphic impulse for the miniature worlds of insects and small animals that so intrigued him. He was fascinated by the miniature, a fact which is evident in both the *Mickey Mouse* and *Silly Symphony* series. The Swiss-born Albert Hurter drew hundreds of anthropomorphic plants, animals and objects for both the shorts and the features. In *Pinocchio*, Jiminy Cricket’s size is contrasted with both the people as well as the objects around him. In *Fantasia*, the fairies that look like dragonflies have sprung from the inspirational brush of Sylvia Holland, an English artist who was one of the art directors for Tchaikovsky’s *Nutcracker Suite*.

Returning from a visit to Europe in 1935, Disney brought back a large number of picture books; they included many illustrated classics. In a memorandum dated 23 December 1935, he outlined his ideas to Ted Sears and the story department:
Alice in Wonderland,
The Walrus, sequence 05.0
March 1958, model sheet, graphite pencil,
pastel and ink, Burbank, California,
Walt Disney Feature Animation
and the Animation Research Library
Some of these little books that I brought back with me from Europe have very fascinating illustrations of little peoples, bees and small insects, who live in mushrooms, pumpkins etc. This quaint atmosphere fascinates me and I was thinking how we could build some little story that would incorporate all of these cute little characters... Mickey and Minnie might take a ride on a magic carpet and arrive in a weird land or forest, meet little elves of the forest, or be captured by an old witch or giants and ogres...

By this time Disney was at work on Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, and his colleagues consisted of artists from both American and European cultural backgrounds. We should not forget the American influence on Disney—it is present in all the films, its optimism and vitality and inspiration from popular art forms like the cinema and the comic strip ever-present, but there is a growing understanding of and a leaning towards the Old World. European influences came through his own childhood and background, his visits to Europe, and through his employment of Europeans. It was a period of intense creativity and confidence, and may be summed up by Joe Grant (1908-2005), who was one of Disney's closest colleagues.
Snow White surrounded by terrifying hands, storyboard drawing
1937, graphite pencil and red pencil,
Burbank, California, Walt Disney
Feature Animation and the
Animation Research Library
I was enthusiastic as hell about that business. I thought it was the greatest thing; I couldn’t think of anything beyond it... I had fallen in love with the idea, particularly the idea, and then him later because, God, he was the idea... 

Theodor Kittelsen
Korustnik i måneskinne
[Stalks of corn in moonlight]
c. 1900, watercolor, graphite, charcoal, Oslo, Museum of Art, Architecture and Design
Snow White clutching a rope, preliminary study

C. 1936, pastel, Burbank, California.
Walt Disney Feature Animation and the Animation Research Library

William Shakespeare,
Arthur Rackham (illustrator)
Le Songe d'une nuit d'été
[A Midsummer Night's Dream]
1909 (Paris: Hodnett), Paris,
Bibliothèque Nationale de France
Fantasia, "Nutcracker Suite," luminous fairy preliminary study
1939, watercolor, gouache, Burbank, California, Walt Disney Feature Animation and the Animation Research Library
Emigrants to Disney from Europe: Disney designers and illustrators

The Swiss-born Albert Hurter (1883–1942) joined Disney in 1931, after working in animation in New York. Disney gave him freedom to offer his own idiosyncratic drawings as ideas for films; he humanized inanimate objects in bizarre and surreal ways. Flowers, plants, furniture, and utensils took on strange and sometimes alarming life under his pen. He introduced Disney and the studio to the work of Busch, Hermann Vogel and Heinrich Kley; the two latter German artists were to influence the early feature films. Hurter had a comprehensive knowledge of European art and a photographic memory, and his influence on both the shorts and the early features was profound. Of the seventy-five Silly Symphonies produced between 1929 and 1939—when they ceased—fifty-two are based on European stories or ideas. By 1936, Hurter was working on Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, and his influence is marked on the features films until the 1950s though he died a decade earlier. Disney described him as "a master creator of fantasy" and John Russell Taylor wrote: His influence is visible in many of Disney's shorts and features up to (his) death at the time of Pinocchio, particularly those aspects of the gothic and the grotesque which relate most closely to European book illustration of the period...
and look back towards art nouveau and symbolism, Hurter indeed seems to have been responsible almost single-handed for grafting the strain on to Disney's original home-grown American."

Two other European artists associated with Hurter were Gustaf Tenggren and Ferdinand Horváth. Tenggren (1896–1970) was Swedish and took on the mantle of another Swedish artist, John Bauer (1882–1918) after the latter's early death from drowning. Tenggren emigrated to the United States in 1920, where he became a successful commercial artist and illustrator. In 1936 Disney appointed him as an art director for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. He stayed for three years. The forests of his homeland appear in the outdoor scenes, the woodcarving remembered from his grandfather's house in Sweden alongside Hurter's style in the Dwarfs' cottage. He designed the famous poster that advertised the film, and which was also used for the music sheets and decorated gramophone record labels. He illustrated a charming book version and went on to provide exquisite inspirational paintings for *Pinocchio*.

Ferdinand Horváth (1891–1973) emigrated from Hungary at about the same time that Tenggren left Sweden and was appointed to *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.
as inspirational sketch artist. He provided atmospheric drawings of Snow White's flight through the forest as well as studies of the Queen, the Huntsman and the Dwarfs. His contribution to the overall appearance of the film has been overlooked, and even some of the animators did not know him, which perhaps explains his departure from the Disney Studio in 1937, just before the release of the film for which he had worked so hard and for which he received no credit.\textsuperscript{10}

Oskar Fischinger (1900–1967) was a German immigrant whose beautiful abstract films were known to Disney. He was employed as designer for the Bach \textit{Toccata and Fugue} section of \textit{Fantasia}, but his radical, uncompromising abstractions were anathema to the literal-minded Disney, and he left the Studio in 1939 after an unhappy and frustrating year. Little of his influence is discernible in the finished film.

Kay Nielsen (1886–1957) came of a distinguished Danish family; his father was the director of the Dagmartheater in Copenhagen and his mother was a famous actor and singer. The Nielsen household was full of artists, writers, and singers, and the boy Nielsen remembered meeting Grieg, Bjornson, and Ibsen among others. Nielsen had a distinguished career in book illustration during the Golden Age just before and during World War I. His illustrations combine delicacy and stylization, often with a melancholy or tragic sentiment. He was also a gifted stage designer, and his background in theater proved useful in the animation business. After leaving the Disney Studio, he opened his own animation studio in New York. His work brought a European approach to American animation that helped influence subsequent generations of animators.
ization, influenced particularly by Beardsley, the Symbolists and oriental art. He came to Hollywood to design Max Reinhardt's *Everyman* for a stage production at the Hollywood Bowl, and in 1938 Disney—through the good offices of Joe Grant, who knew the quality of Nielsen's work—employed him as art director for the last two sections of *Fantasia*: Moussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain* and Schubert's *Ave Maria*. An idiosyncratic and exceptionally individual artist, he found it difficult, like Fischinger, to work in the tightly departmentalized conditions at Disney, but, unlike Fischinger, considerably more of his talent is identifiable in the film. He was proud and introspective, and though able to speak excellent English (unlike the unfortunate Fischinger), he was not able to adapt to the rough and tumble of the cartoon factory. He was also considerably older than the rest of the staff. After leaving Disney, absolute poverty was avoided through his obtaining the commission for three mural paintings in the Los Angeles area, which remain as testimonials, apart from his book illustrations, to his genius. They are astonishing, radiant works.  

Nielsen's love of oriental art is captured in the opening and closing shots of the Moussorgsky sequence which show the sharply etched mountain placed in a landscape reminiscent of Hokusai or Hiroshige. The detailing of buildings, design of line and color, and variation of form, with all its rhythmic qualities, complement Nielsen's unique vision.
Hans Baldung Grien
*Le Sabbat des sorcières [Witches’ Sabbath]*
c. 1514, woodcut, Paris, Musée du Louvre, Edmond de Rothschild Collection

Jean-Jacques Feuchère
*Satan*
1833, bronze, Private Collection

William Blake
*The Circle of the Thieves, Agnello dei Brunelleschi Attacked by a Six-footed Serpent*
1826–27, etching, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, gift of David Y. Hodgson
the devil on the mountain, gravestones and grotesque figures have precise origins in sketches by Nielsen. His designs for the Ave Maria section reveal his debt to the Romantic period of art and especially to the work of Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), whose austere, mystical paintings are reinterpreted by Nielsen in a more diffuse and less assertive way. Friedrich is precise while Nielsen/Disney is vague, and throughout this section, beautifully painted and animated as it is, we can observe Disney’s struggle to come to terms with the artistic impulses of the Old World. He wanted the end of Fantasia to transcend all the work that had preceded it—and indeed all the work that he and his artists had achieved up to that time. The struggle that he had in attempting to convey his feeling may be summed up in his comments at a story meeting on 8 December 1938:

The beauty we can get from controlled color and music, everything we use here will be worth it. This stuff means more, it’s richer, it’s like a painting. People go all over Europe to look at cathedrals, and when you go in they don’t look like this—you don’t see the beauty there…

Other emigrants from Europe who worked for Disney included the Hungarian–born Jules Engel (1909–2003), who said he was employed as consultant on cho-
reography for Fantasia, and the Italian Rico Lebrun (1900–1964), who instructed the Disney artists in animal articulation and anatomy while they were working on Bambi (1942).

**Literary, musical, and cinematic sources**

Walt Disney remembered his grandmother reading fairy stories to him as a child, and he was so impressed by a silent film version of Snow White that he produced his own version some twenty years later. Grimm was considerably altered, and in some areas softened, though Disney brought his own elements of terror to the story. When Snow White first meets the Prince, the mise-en-scène of Gothic balcony, flowers in blossom, courtyard and wall, and the protagonists separated by height are similar in both Disney’s film and in the MGM version of Romeo and Juliet (1936). The sense of danger is dramatized by Shakespeare with the arrival of day, and by Disney with the jealous Queen looking on from her curtained window. As Snow White lies in her glass coffin at the end of the film, Disney again makes direct allusion to the MGM film of Romeo and Juliet. In a story meeting of 7 December 1936, Disney commented:

Kay Nielsen

*Fantasia, “Ave Maria,” monks in the forest, preliminary study 1939, pastel, Burbank, California, Walt Disney Feature Animation and the Animation Research Library*
There's not much light except around her. She's got to be beautiful as she lays there. Sort of like Juliet... When someone good dies there's always the question "Why?" So many bad things that go on. Remember "Romeo and Juliet?" How pretty Juliet looked? They had her so she looked very beautiful there... I believe any fairy tale can have wishing things... I believe in fairy tales.

It was not, however, only the Hollywood product that Disney encouraged his staff to see. Marc Davis, a senior animator and one Disney's "Nine Old Men", recalled that they "saw every ballet, every film. If a film was good we would go and see it five times... Walt rented a studio up in North Hollywood and we would see a selection of films—anything from Charlie Chaplin to unusual subjects. Anything that might produce growth, that might be stimulating—the cutting of the scenes, the staging, how a group of scenes was put together. "The Cabinet of Dr Caligari, Nosferatu, were things that we saw. I remember "Metropolis.""[12]

Europe and the silent cinema, and German expressionism in particular, form the background to the powerful scenes of Snow White's flight through the forest and the Queen's transformation scene, and later for scenes in both "Pinocchio" and "Fantasia."
Gustaf Tenggren
Pinocchio imprisoned
in Stromboli's wagon
preliminary study
c. 1939, watercolor on pastelboard,
Private Collection
The grammar of the popular film, melodrama, pantomime, and the American children's Christmas play are all foundations upon which the film is built, providing a framework within which the characters can move convincingly.

The second feature film, *Pinocchio* (1940), though based on the Italian classic by Carlo Collodi, was much altered and adjusted after a difficult period of gestation. Gustaf Tenggren's influence is noticeable, and he brings a dark northern-European atmosphere to the look of the film.

*Fantasia* is, of course, steeped in European sources both in its appearance and in the music chosen. The references to German expressionist cinema is marked, especially in the Dukas section *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. Here, the power of the necromancer is revealed through shadows and exaggeration in a way that is reminiscent of Paul Leni's *Waxworks* (1924) and the even earlier films of Wegener's *Golem* (1914 and 1920). There are reminders of Murnau's *Faust* (1926) in the looming power of the devil on the Bare Mountain.

Then came *Dumbo* (1941) with surreal elements that anticipate the link Disney would make with Dalí. *Bambi* (1942) is based on the German author Felix Salten's novel, but the film is very American and owes its spare styling to the Chinese artist Tyrus Wong.
Fantasia, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice;"
Mickey's shadow destroying
the brooms against a blue background
storyboard drawing

1940, watercolor on paper,
airbrush on celluloid, Burbank, California,
Walt Disney Feature Animation
and the Animation Research Library
After World War II, Disney turned once again to Europe. *Cinderella* (1950), is based on Perrault’s version rather than on Grimm’s cruelly vindictive story. There are reminders of Fragonard’s pastoral landscapes, but the visual patterning is again expressionistic, with marked references to the film noir style of the 1940s. Reviewing a revival of the film in 1991, Anthony Lane remarked:

It somehow escapes the confines of the Disney tradition. There are moments which inhale the atmosphere of real films, or at least that particular brand of reality practised by American cinema of the period... Disney is still unsurpassed as an introduction to cinema.\(^1\)

The *Alice in Wonderland* of 1951 loses something of the dark tranquility of Carroll, but gains from an injection of vaudeville turns which can only be described as Franzically American. Where Carroll is quietly surreal, Disney is bombastic and anarchic, which in its own way returns us to Carroll’s dangerous tranquility. Disney then produced *Peter Pan* (1953), which simplifies and clarifies an uncomfortable original. It remains an animated melodrama with a large number of human characters, and few anthropomorphized animals. The creative talents of Mary Blair (1911–1978) as inspirational artist for these three films is strongly felt, but after
_Peter Pan_ she left the studio, and death or departure removed the indigenous European talents who had enriched the work of the Thirties and Forties. Many developed new careers as book illustrators, and senior creative talents like Joe Grant had left. Disney was absorbed with his "new toy" Disneyland, taking some of his best artists over to work on the Magic Kingdom.

After the American story about two dogs in love, _Lady and the Tramp_ (1955), Disney turned back to Europe with Perrault's version of _Sleeping Beauty_ (1959). The new creative talent was Eyvind Earle (1916–2000), an artistic *enfant terrible* whose style Disney supported in his quest for "a continuing illustration." Earle said that he wanted "stylised, simplified Gothic, a medieval tapestry out of the surface wherever possible... everything from the foreground to the far distance is in focus. That gives you more depth". It also gives the viewer an unfocused visual viewpoint, so that the eye is free to wander over the huge Technirama surface, all of which is filled with crisp detail, whatever action is taking place. Earle used a number of European sources including Van Eyck, the Italian Primitives and their landscapes, Dürer and Persian miniatures. He paid special attention to the _Très Riches Heures_ and to Laurence Olivier's film of _Henry V_ (1944), which is not surprising since it is itself a homage to the French paintings.
Eyvind Earle
Sleeping Beauty, King Stefan’s castle, scene 12, production background
Gouache, Burbank, California, Walt Disney Feature Animation and the Animation Research Library
Laurence Olivier
Henry V
1944, film still, Paris, Bibliothèque du Film et de l’Image
One Hundred and One Dalmatians (1961) from the novel by Dodie Smith and The Sword in the Stone (1963) from T.H. White’s novel, were both based on English sources. The first is influenced by the graphic style of the English illustrator Ronald Searle, and the film has a fluidity that is partly explained by the use of xeroxed outlines for characters and backgrounds; the intentions of the animators can be discerned in the line, rather than diffused by tracing, and then inking and painting, the animators’ drawings. The process saved a great deal of money, but Disney did not care for the new stylized look. The art director was Ken Anderson (1909–1993), who brought delicacy and feeling to both the interiors and exteriors of Dodie Smith’s very English story. The Disney artists were less successful with T.H. White’s curious mixture of magic and irony.

The last film that Disney supervised before his death in 1966 was The Jungle Book (1967), and although it is based on Rudyard Kipling’s classic, its energy owes little to the original. It regains some of Disney’s old exuberance and comic flair and has the graphic vitality of the old Disney shorts. The characters are firmly established and animated with great skill, and they develop and react with one another both dramatically and comically. The film is a reminder of the studio’s own past, but also of the anthropomorphic qualities of artists like Kley, Daumier and Busch. It is
Some characterization in Disney's animated feature films

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

I have great affection for Snow White, so criticized by contemporary and later reviewers. She is at the centre of Tenggren's famous poster, and she holds the film together by her presence in thirteen out of the film's twenty scenes. She functions as a young woman enjoying a degree of premarital freedom, and she expresses courage and independence. She has romantic longings and, magically, she survives death. She offers us an elixir, a pure heart and intense longing can build a love that transcends suffering and pain. I find the uncertain delineation of her character in graphic terms one of her most endearing qualities. Striving for realistic rendering, the Disney artists achieved a naive gaucherie that adds to her vulnerability. She is not perfectly drawn and there is a crudity in rendering, a jerkiness, a constant reminder of her graphic fragility. The art-deco plasticity, yellow dress, puffed sleeves and bright red hair-ribbon match the round baby-face and wide-eyed look of the all-American child innocent. The cinematic references are to Janet Gaynor, Mary Pickford and above all to Shirley Temple, who was the most popular world
star in the mid-1930s. Snow White's ribbon, gestures, voice, echo Temple, pre-sexual, yet guided by adults to be consciously imitative of sex with a confusion between the romantic European heroine and the popular heroine as represented by Temple.

The graphic heritage of the heroine in illustration goes back a long way. Victorian illustration romanticizes her into a medieval beauty, and the ladies portrayed by Burne-Jones and the Pre-Raphaelites are passive, expectant beauties; in France she is decoratively adorned as the goddess of spring in Le Printemps by Eugène Grasset (1845–1917), a Symbolist. Grasset, like Nielsen, was interested in oriental and especially Japanese art. His heroines are closely linked, like Snow White, to nature and the natural world. His style is both decorative and linear, with bold outlines like those that contain the Disney characters. In one of Grasset's studies, he depicts women playing musical instruments to animals,9 and in Disney, Snow White sings to the animals of which she has been so recently afraid. In Germany, Ludwig Richter (1803–1884) provided many illustrations for Grimm and other German folk tales. He illustrated a blond Snow White in the forest, surrounded, like Disney's heroine, by animals. The Disney Snow White also began, in early sketches, as a blond heroine. Another German illustrator, brought to the Disney artists' attention

Ludwig Richter
Frühlingsabend [Spring evening]
1844, oil on canvas, Düsseldorf,
museum kunst pohlst
by Albert Hurter, was Hermann Vogel (1854–1921), whose profusely illustrated annuals were obtained for the Disney Studio library. His detailed pictures of animals and humans, blending the realistic with the fantastic, held an especial charm for the Disney artists working on both Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and Pinocchio.

The character of Snow White appeals to a wide audience—it must be remembered that this was not yet a discrete audience of different ages or attitudes—and we experience a distinct sense of loss, especially at the bier. There is, however, a more complex response at the end of the film when we adults as children or children as adults-to-be, “lose” Snow White out of our lives. We identify with the Dwarfs, while she goes on to marriage and sexual fulfilment. We and the Dwarfs are left behind to grow old and die, while Snow White, resurrected, moves towards everlasting life. The complexity of her appeal lies not only in the imaginative and sometimes graceful delineation of her movement—the house cleaning and dancing sequences are good examples—not only in the piping of her childlike voice, not only in her ambiguous role as sister, playmate, child, mother or sweetheart, but also in an appeal that stretches back through the previous century and through the illustrated heroines of European fairy tales and romances.
Theodor Kittelsen

*The Imp and the Snail*

1887, watercolor, graphite, Oslo, National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design

Moritz von Schwind

*Der Traum des Gefangenen* ([The dream of the prisoner]),

1836, oil on pastel board, Munich, Neue Pinakothek, Schack-Galerie
The Dwarfs are a contrast to Snow White, children to her as mother figure and adults to her as child. They, like the animals, are closely linked to the earth—they are miners—and they have animal characteristics. Their forbears take us back through the illustrated tradition of Rackham, Bauer, Vogel and Kittelsen, but the more sinister aspects delineated by those artists were exchanged for softer, rounder characters. The Dwarfs emerge physically and sexually saler than the grotesque adults who appeared in the illustrated books and who threatened or abducted the heroine. Each Dwarf has a universal trait reminding us of the European morality plays and the seven deadly sins, and their voices were taken from the theatrical tradition of vaudeville. As we move further into a bewildering and uncertain century, they remain robust defenders of the good as idealized in Snow White.

The Queen still induces terror, especially in her transformation scene. Disney claimed that he wanted the Queen to be a mixture of Lady Macbeth and the Big Bad Wolf. Her face is the Hollywood mask, Joan Crawford indeed, with age held at bay by cosmetics, and she follows the European tradition of witches, from Circe onwards. Like Morgan le Fey she controls not only mankind but also the elements, with storm, lightning and wind at her command. She is the contrast to Snow White, her power extending beyond the castle walls, a representative of woman feared by all.
the male in a male dominated society. She is both a *femme fatale* and a genuinely disturbing figure from an older world. Joe Grant worked closely on her transformation scene, drawing upon his knowledge of European illustrative sources, such as Wilhelm Busch and Arthur Rackham. The Queen's pet raven, and the skull she keeps as ornament, act as disturbingly comic contrasts to the Queen in her laboratory. There are also references to the fascination with scientific power in both European cinema and Hollywood, from the 1920s onwards. Disney made specific reference to *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1932) in story meetings, and we have noted the power of German expressionist cinema.

The cinema in turn has been influenced by *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (and other Disney films) from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) to Spielberg's films and most recently the Star Wars epics. It is the linear, drawn images of Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* that transcend the incarcerating time scale of 1937. The characters escape the deadening effect of "realism" that dates all performances on stage and screen, and they come alive for us through our imaginations, as do the illustrations of the books that inspired the Disney artists.
Carl Spitzweg

*Der Rabe [The Raven]*
c. 1845, oil on panel, Munich, Neue Pinakothek

Arthur Rackham

*Who has been eating off my plate?*, illustration for the fairy tale “The Seven Ravens” by the Brothers Grimm
1908, pen and ink, watercolor, The Free Library of Philadelphia, Rare Books Department

Joe Grant

*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, raven on a skull preliminary study
Pastel, Burbank, California, Walt Disney Feature Animation and the Animation Research Library
Pinocchio

European influences are profound, from the Italian story to the design, mise-en-scène, characterization and musical score. The American elements appear less integrated into the framework than in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Pinocchio himself is an American child in Bavarian costume, developed out of the Commedia clown drawings of Collodi's Italian illustrator Attilio Mussino (1878–1954). The hobo-like character of Jiminy Cricket represents an American searching for his identity which extends to Pinocchio, who searches for his father and for his own identity. The film's theme is loss, with father losing son and vice versa. Geppetto is distinctly German, of the Old World and creating wooden toys in an Old World setting evoked by the inspirational paintings of Gustaf Tenggren. The Blue Fairy is an American glamour girl of the period, a reminder of the Hollywood star on which her idealism is based, and she literally comes from a star in the sky. The other main characters come from a threatening and unsettling Old World—the Italian puppeteer Stromboli, the strolling crooked Fox and Cat, and the Dickensian coachman who leads naughty little boys to Pleasure Island and then turns them into donkeys. The brooding darkness of this scene and that of Geppetto's incarceration in Monstro the whale, is made up of a subdued palette and chiaroscuro, and reminds
us of Doré in general and the *Inferno* in particular. The film remains uncomfortable viewing and has never been a favorite, despite ecstatic reviews during its first and subsequent reissues.
Fantasia

Diminutive fairies were popularized in nineteenth-century illustration and were no longer the threatening figures of earlier folklore. As the boundaries of nature were pushed back by increasing industrialization, and by scientific, geographical and medical discovery, so the fairy world diminished in power and size. This miniature domain of illustration is captured in the flowers, mushrooms and fairies of Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker Suite. There are reminders of Richard Doyle (1824–1883) whose enchanted worlds were revisited by Arthur Rackham and by John Bauer. Grandville is also recalled, with his anthropomorphized plants and insects. In Germany, Philipp Otto Runge (1777–1810) painted a series of cherub fairies for his series on the seasons, and Disney takes us through the seasons in this section. The English artist Sylvia Holland (1900–1974) contributed much to the delicacy of the musical interpretation. Holland knew and loved English flora and fauna and was herself, unlike many of the Disney artists, musically trained. Jules Engel (1909–2003), Hungarian born, said he was a consultant on the choreography for both this section and for The Dance of the Hours. He paid tribute to Daumier, who indirectly inspired his own work and that of his colleagues at the studio. He recalled that later.
Fantasia, The Pastoral Symphony (1940)

Following *Snow White* and *The Seven Dwarfs* and while already working on *Pinocchio*, Walt Disney started production on a film that, for the first and the last time in his life, claimed to be a work of art. Even though the concern to popularize classical and modern music is obviously there, *Fantasia* is something of a mixed bag, with a profusion of images derived from Western art. The sequence illustrating Beethoven's Symphony No. 6 (the Pastoral) is a striking example. A most unassuming artist who was greatly admired by Walt Disney and his collaborators, Swiss-born Albert Hurter, was largely responsible for the artistic conception of this sequence. Educated at the Zurich School of Architecture and later in Berlin, Hurter had a broad artistic background and was clearly keen on German symbolism (occasionally to the point of caricature), which appears as the model for the Disney Pastoral. The worlds of Swiss artist Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901) and German artist Franz von Stuck (1863–1928) are the most widely used, populated as they are with fauns playing music and pugnacious male and female centaurs, which are literally reproduced in Fantasia. The scenery is inspired by these artists as well, and there is a fleeting glimpse of Böcklin's famous Island of the Dead in the background.

Other connections can be established, for instance with the funny sculpture *Fan and Bear Cubs* by French artist Emmanuel Frémiet (1867). As for the cherubs that enliven the Pastoral, they derive from the pre-Romanticism of Philipp Otto Runge (1777–1810) and his *Times of the Day* series, which was designed, in his own words, as a "fantastic abstract and pictorial musical poem." The influence of the early clear glass vases by Émile Galle (*The Vine Snail*, 1884, *Musée de l'École de Nancy*) is also visible. Finally, since Disney often resorted to self-quotations, the cartoon short *Water Babies* (1935) appears as a prototype when compared with certain scenes from *Fantasia*. 

**Fantasia, “The Pastoral Symphony,” centaurs picking grapes, sequence 5:2, drawing 1842, preliminary study 1939, pastel, Burbank, California, Walt Disney Feature Animation and the Animation Research Library.**

**Franz von Stuck**

*Dissomance* 1910, oil on panel, Munich, *Museum Villa Stuck*

**Franz von Stuck**

*Amazone* 1890, bronze, Private Collection

**Franz von Stuck**

*Verwundeter Kentauros* [Wounded Centaur] 1892, bronze, Private Collection

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*Fantasia, The Pastoral Symphony,* Walt Disney Pictures, 1940.
Richard Doyle
The Fairy Queen takes an airy drive,
illustration for Richard Doyle
and William Allingham, In Fairyland:
Pictures from the Elf World
1869–70 (London: Longmans, Green,
Reader and Dyer), colored wood engraving,
London, Victoria and Albert Museum
Walt had fantastic talent. He had carte-blanche for storyboard... He was a man who loved film, who was also a good actor, intuitive. Nothing was intellectualized. *The Nutcracker Suite* was a massive piece of illustration. If you run that section by itself it shows some of the best art of the industry.10

The prehistoric monsters that inhabit the early world conjured up by Disney and his artists for Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* have their origin in science journals and in the cinema. The trick films of Georges Méliès (1861–1938) were full of monsters and animated fossils. *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1915), the famous animated creation of Winsor McCay (1867–1934), and the fantasy films of Willis O'Brien (1886–1962), were familiar to Disney and his artists and Disney himself loved dinosaurs. The child in him responded to their mixture of charm and terror.

For the centaurs and centaurettes of Beethoven's *Sixth Symphony*, Disney turned to high academic art of the nineteenth century, from the English artist John Waterhouse (1849–1917) to the Swiss-German Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901). *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896) by Waterhouse was copied by the Disney artists for inspirational paintings of the first glimpse of the centaurettes bathing in the pool. Böcklin's *The Isle of the Dead* was especially popular and frequently reproduced. His
Fantasia. "The Pastoral Symphony," young fawns playing the flute, sequence 04-2, sketch 1255
preliminary study
1939, gouache, Burbank, California,
Walt Disney Feature Animation
and the Animation Research Library
Fantasia, "The Pastoral Symphony."
Bacchus, study model
1939, painted plaster,
San Francisco,
Walt Disney Family Foundation

Gustave Moreau
La Licorne (The unicorn)
1885, oil on canvas,
Paris, Musée Gustave Moreau

Arnold Böcklin
Das Schweigen des Waldes
(The silence of the woods)
1885, oil on panel,
Poznan, Muzeum Narodowe
mixture of mysticism and vulgarity was attractive to Disney; we are lurching from beauty to bathos in both Böcklin and Disney.

For the devil Chernabog in the Moussorgsky section Night on Bald Mountain we are indebted once again to the art direction of Kay Nielsen. His paintings of the devil and the creatures that inhabit his gothic world are captured in the film, and there are reminders too of German film expression. F.W. Murnau’s Faust (1926) comes to mind, where “the entire town seems to be covered by the vast folds of a demon’s cloak... as the demonic forces of darkness prepare to devour the powers of light.” In the Disney version the shadow of Chernabog’s hands falls across the roofs of the sleeping town and the buildings lean towards the source of dark power. Disney also turned to Heinrich Kley, whose work he collected, and he tried to find ways, without success, of introducing humour into the section.
Sir Edward John Poynter
*Cinderella*
Second half of the nineteenth century, oil on canvas. Montreal Fine Arts Museum legacy of William Johns and Agnes Leirmont

Mary Blair
*Cinderella in rags, preliminary study*
1938, gouache on pasteboard, Burbank, California, Walt Disney Feature Animation and the Animation Research Library

Beatrix Potter
The trial of the Knave of Hearts, with the White Rabbit addressing the court, Illustration for *Alice in Wonderland*
1894, pencil, pen and ink, watercolor, London, Victoria and Albert Museum
Some characterization in the post-war features

The heroine of Cinderella (1950) is an all-American girl, and though more skillfully animated than her predecessor Snow White, is just as two-dimensional. She reflects the nineteenth century's image of passive femininity, as in the Cinderellas of Burne-Jones or Millais, as well as the post-war concern that America's women should return to their pre-war domestic subservience. Though there is some French influence in design, especially in the garden exteriors, the atmosphere of the film is expressionistic, filtered through Hollywood's own genre of film noir. Mary Blair's conceptual art, which influenced so much of Disney between 1943 and 1953, is much in evidence. The evil stepmother is powerfully animated and a reminder of her predecessor, the Queen.

The mice who help Cinderella are reminiscent of those painted by Beatrix Potter (1866–1943), whose work was widely admired in the United States. In 1936 she had refused permission for Disney to make an animated film of her first illustrated book The Tale of Peter Rabbit (1902) because, she said, "My drawings are not good enough. To make Silly Symphonies they will have to enlarge them and that will show up all the imperfections."¹⁰ In Potter's The Tailor of Gloucester (1903), mice are kept under tea cups by the cat Simpkin, and in Cinderella, Lucifer the cat does
the same thing with Gus, the newcomer mouse. There is a mouse Cinderella in Potter's *A Cinderella Fantasy*, an early idea for an illustrated book. We are also reminded of Aesop's mice and of the many illustrated renderings of mice in La Fontaine, including those of Doré, Grandville and Griset.

Many artists have illustrated Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books. The first, and still the most famous, is John Tenniel (1820–1914), but there have been many others including Arthur Rackham and an English artist, David Hall (1905–1964), who painted some extraordinary hallucinatory pictures while he was employed by Disney, but which were never used. The film pays some homage to Tenniel, but the real inspiration for the design is once again Mary Blair. Her weird and wonderful surreal paintings are a constant reference.

*Peter Pan* (1953) had been planned by Disney since the late 1930s, and he knew the book well. The Disney Library copy, illustrated by F.D. Bedford (1864–1954), was heavily annotated in Disney's characteristic blue pencil. Disney removes a great deal of sentimentality and provides us with a robust melodrama, "Pan American" as C.A. Lejeune put it in her review in the London Observer. Peter Pan is drawn to look like an amiable young tough and is given the voice of a boy, while the fairy Tinker Bell owes more to Hollywood than to Rackham.
Gustave Moreau

La Libellule [The dragonfly]

1884, watercolor,
Paris, Musée Gustave Moreau

Peter Pan, Tinker Bell on the map of Never Land, sequence 11, scene 46
1953, production background, celluloid, ink and gouache, Burbank, California,
Walt Disney Feature Animation and the Animation Research Library

Arthur Rackham

Twilight Dreams, illustration for Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens
1912, watercolor, pencil and ink,
University of Liverpool, Art and Heritage collections
Disney's most expensive film up till this time was *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). Disney himself was occupied elsewhere with his 'new toy' Disneyland and had little time for the feature film. Mary Blair had left, and other senior talents had gone, or were working for Disneyland—in itself a recreation of European sources based on the animated feature films. *Sleeping Beauty* is innovative only in design and in technical presentation; otherwise it harks back to all the earlier work. Many artists had been attracted to the story of the sleeping beauty, Doré, Burne-Jones and Rackham among them. The heroine Aurora is a more than usually insipid Disney heroine and the really memorable character is Maleficent, a terrifying figure who turns into a dragon.

Mention should also be made of the charming characterization that the Disney artists brought to *101 Dalmatians* (1961) and *The Jungle Book* (1967). In the former there is a lightness of touch and strong linear style that invests both the dog and human characters. There is also a splendid villain in Cruella De Vil, *The Jungle Book* has robust characterization with no attempt to emulate the austere and patriarchal characters of Kipling's original story. The result is comic strip exuberance and a return by Disney to his roots.
Walt Disney and Europe

Disney was an American, steeped in American popular culture, especially the cinema, popular music, and comic-strip art. He made use of graphic and musical European traditions, from Germany, Scandinavia, France, England, and Italy. The mass audience of his day contained both adults and children—the two were never separated—and it was always at the forefront of his thinking. Through his genius as story-teller via the new medium of animation he invited his audiences to extend its vision, just as he extended his own. He asked them to enjoy art, music, and literature from the older cultures which in turn were uneasily reinterpreted. He used the individual talents of artists who were either European or influenced by the great illustrative tradition of Europe which culminated in the Golden Age of book illustration in the first decades of the twentieth century. Disney absorbed the past and the Old World and reclaimed them for a new and still vibrant culture; his optimism and energy were entirely transatlantic. At their best, the Disney films universalize human experience, both "vulgar" in the old-fashioned sense "of the people," and profound. Out of literature, art and music, Disney and his colleagues produced a series of films which stand as works of art in their own right, transcending the ephemeral and continuing to evoke wonder and delight.
Sleeping Beauty, Prince Phillip in the forest of thorns, sequence 19, scene 24-2
1999; production background, celluloid, ink and gouache; Burbank, California,
Malt Disney Feature Animation and the Animation Research Library
Beyond the Mirror: Walt Disney and literature and cinema