



The Snowy Day and the Art of Ezra Jack Keats

September 9, 2011– January 29, 2012

Grades K–12

Pre- and Post-Visit Materials for Educators

EXHIBITION SUMMARY

The Snowy Day and the Art of Ezra Jack Keats is the first major exhibition in this country to pay tribute to award-winning author and illustrator Ezra Jack Keats (1916–1983), whose beloved children’s books include *The Snowy Day*, *Whistle for Willie*, and *Peter’s Chair*. *The Snowy Day* was the first modern full-color picture book to feature an African-American protagonist. Published in 1962, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement in America, the book went on to become an inspiration for generations of readers, transforming children’s literature forever.

The exhibition features over 80 original works by the artist, from preliminary sketches and dummies or preparatory books, to final paintings and collages, including examples of Keats’s most introspective but less-known works inspired by Asian art and poetry. One of the galleries has been transformed into a reading room inspired by Keats’s art and stories.

From The Jewish Museum website: www.thejewishmuseum.org

Ezra Jack Keats

Born Jacob Ezra Katz to Eastern European Jewish immigrant parents, Keats grew up in the impoverished neighborhood of East New York in Brooklyn, which later provided the inspiration for the settings of his numerous children’s books. As a young child, Keats was drawn to creating artwork, which his mother encouraged. Unable to afford art supplies, Keats used any type of material he could find—from shoe boxes to burlap—as his canvases. He began by copying other artists’ work he found in magazines and later from books in the library. However, a chance encounter with a pious Jewish man from his neighborhood led Keats to explore creating original art.

Raised during the Depression, Keats turned to creating artwork as a means of coping with his grim surroundings. He writes, “I didn’t really understand it, but all of the pain, all the nuances of feeling, all the senses of poetry and music when I’d watch the sunset or the sunrise, or watch people, I only had one place to take it, and I painted.”¹ In the 1940s Keats found employment in the comics industry cleaning up pencil lines and inking background for Marvel Comics.

After a brief stint in the Army during WWII (he was sent to Florida to design camouflage patterns), Keats took up residence in Paris for a period, dedicating himself to creating paintings.

¹ Exhibition catalogue

Encouraged by the sales of these paintings, Keats returned to Brooklyn to find work with publishing houses illustrating book dust jackets and children's books written by other authors. After many years working in this field, Keats finally set out to write and illustrate a book of his own; *The Snowy Day*, featuring an African-American boy as the protagonist, was published in 1962 and changed Keats's life forever. From there, Keats authored and illustrated 21 books, many featuring African-American protagonists and set in urban environments.

Keats's children's books explore themes of isolation, bullying, friendship, sibling rivalry, and other issues he experienced growing up in Brooklyn. As a child, Keats often felt isolated and invisible to the world; writing offered him an opportunity to revisit his childhood and create a world in which the protagonists escape bullies, experience familial love, and find adventure, all in an urban environment that is made to look beautiful rather than gritty. The narratives of these often poignant stories are driven by the atmosphere established by Keats's use of collage and marbled, handmade paper rather than by an intricate plot. Original artwork in The Jewish Museum's exhibition include scenes from books such as *The Snowy Day*, *Goggles*, *Peter's Chair*, *A Letter to Amy*, *Louie*, *Louie's Search*, *The Trip*, *Whistle for Willie*, *Regard to the Man in the Moon*, and others.

GOALS (Students will...)

- explore storytelling through a study of a book's setting and atmosphere.
- be introduced to the biography and visual style of author and illustrator Ezra Jack Keats.
- compare and contrast the major themes—such as identity, isolation, adventure, friendship—presented in Keats's children's books.

VOCABULARY

Collage	A work of art created by pasting on a single surface various materials, such as newspaper clippings, parts of photographs, and other paper or textile fragments.
Protagonist	The leading character, hero, or heroine of a drama or other literary work.
Antagonist	The adversary of the hero or protagonist of a drama or other literary work.
Illustration	A picture executed to accompany a printed text, such as a book or an advertisement, in order to reinforce the meaning or enhance the effect of the text.
Marble paper	Hand made paper that contains patterns similar to smooth marble or other stone.
Point of view	The perspective of the narrator in relation to the story.

Adapted from dictionary.com

PRE- and POST-VISIT IDEAS

Below are suggestions for activities that can be done either before or after your museum visit. We have divided the activities so that they are age-appropriate, however, you may find that all of them may be applicable to your class.

Activities for Elementary School Students

1. Author/Illustrator Study: Read several books by Ezra Jack Keats, such as *The Snowy Day*, *Peter's Chair*, *Whistle for Willie*, *Louie*, *Regards to the Man in the Moon*, and/or *Louie's Search*. Consider character, setting, plot, and mood as depicted in the story and accompanying illustrations.

- What are the similarities and differences in the stories?
- What are the major themes?
- How do the illustrations enhance the story?

Research Keats's life, considering whether elements of his biography are evident in his books. For more information, explore the following websites and book:

- *Ezra Jack Keats: A Biography with Illustrations* (listed in Resources below).
- www.ezra-jack-keats.org/
- www.lib.usm.edu/

Suggested author/illustrator study exercises:

- Writing letters: Ask students to choose one character from a Keats book and write a letter that includes questions or comments they have for that character.
- Alternate endings: Have students consider how a book might have ended, had one of the characters made a different decision. They may discuss, write, or sketch out their alternative version of the story.

2. Keats drew inspiration for the settings of his children's books from the Brooklyn neighborhood where he grew up. Instead of depicting these city neighborhoods as gritty and scary, Keats chose to beautify them in his illustrations. His mixture of collage and paint create an urban landscape where there is beauty observed in the street billboards and adventure found in a lost pair of goggles.

Suggested neighborhood activity:

- Take your students on a walk around the neighborhood. On your walk, ask them to note the things they see along the way. What types of buildings do they notice? How would they describe the people they see? Were there any pets out for a walk or children playing? What colors do they notice?
- Bring a camera (or cameras) on your neighborhood walk and take photos of the neighborhood. Back at school, print out the photos—they can be black and white—on regular copy paper and distribute them out to the students. How do these images compare and contrast with the neighborhood images depicted in Keats's books? Ask your students to create and write a story describing an adventure related to the images you took on your neighborhood walk.

3. Questions/Activities based on Ezra Jack Keats' *Louie*.

- What is unusual about how Louie reacts to the puppets at the show?
- How do Susie and Roberto respond to Louie during the show?

- Why do you think Louie forms an attachment to Gussie?
- Look closely at the street scene in which Louie is walking home after the puppet show. What sort of mood is created by this scene? What do you think Louie's mood is? How does Keats depict the street? What sort of materials does Keats use in his depiction?
- At the end of the book someone leaves the puppet for Louie. Who do you imagine left the puppet and why?
- What theme(s) are explored in this book?

4. As a young boy, Keats often turned to drawing and painting as a means of coping with the grim circumstances of his childhood. His inspiration came from many sources including scenes from his window.

- Choose one or two of Keats's books such as *The Snowy Day* or *Goggles!* to read to your students. After reading, focus on a scene in which the reader's viewpoint is the same as the protagonist's, for instance the scene in *Goggles!* where Archie looks through the pipe to see the bullies and Willie on the other end or the first scene in *The Snowy Day* when Peter looks out his window. Ask your students to consider the unique point of view depicted in each illustration.
- Using pencil and paper, ask the students to draw a scene that might take place outside their bedroom window. What do they see? Is it a sunny day or cloudy? Do they see people, buildings, cars, or animals?

Activities for Middle and High School Students

1. "I love city life," Keats once said. "All the beauty that other people see in country life, I find taking walks and seeing the multitudes of people. . . . I was a city kid. I wouldn't think of setting [my stories] anywhere I didn't know."

- Have students research images of Brooklyn during the 1930s and 1940s, specifically areas of East New York, where Keats grew up. How would they describe these neighborhoods? What groups of people lived there?
- Show the students Keats's books such as *The Snowy Day*, *Goggles!*, *Louie* or *Whistle for Willie*. Ask them to describe the neighborhoods Keats depicts. Have the students explore images online of The Jewish Museum's exhibition *The Radical Camera: New York's Photo League, 1936 — 1951*. How are Keats's neighborhoods similar to or different from the images the students have researched and those they see online taken by member of the Photo League?
- Ask students to draw a scene from their own neighborhood focusing on ways they can highlight distinct characteristics. Next, have the students collage onto their drawings by using torn or cut pieces of paper. These pieces of paper can come from magazines or newspapers or may be patterned and color paper. Have the students consider how different moods are evoked by different color combinations. Finally, have the students write a story describing an adventure related to the scene from their neighborhood.

2. Keats admired the nineteenth-century artist Honoré Daumier, and his influence on Keats is reflected in *Shantytown* (see enclosed image), a painting of unemployed men during the Depression. In the late 1930s, Keats also worked as an assistant mural painter for the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

- Ask the students to research the Great Depression, focusing on images produced during this time. How do these images compare with Keats's painting?
- Have students also research the WPA and other artists who had been involved in the program. Do you think working in the WPA had any influence on the stories and characters of Keats's children's books?

3. Lauded as the first full-color children's book to feature an African-American protagonist, *The Snowy Day*, published in 1962, depicts the story of a child named Peter who encounters snowfall for the first time.

- Have the students read *The Snowy Day*. What theme(s) are expressed in this book? How does the protagonist experience his first encounter with snowfall? How does the protagonist deal with the local bullies and the disappointment of the melted snowball found in his snow suit? Are there any adult themes expressed in the book?
- Ask the students to research American politics in the 1960s, specifically the Civil Rights Movement. What occurred during this time period and how does *The Snowy Day* fit within the context of this movement? Do you think *The Snowy Day* is Keats's response to what was occurring at this time? Is the protagonist in *The Snowy Day* depicted positively or negatively?
- Encourage students to read works by Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, and other writers focusing on images, writings, and music created at this time. How have other authors and artists portrayed African-American subjects at this particular point in history?

RESOURCES

Nahson, Claudia. *The Snowy Day and the Art of Ezra Jack Keats*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011.

Alderson, Brian. *Ezra Jack Keats: Artist and Picture-Book Maker*. Gretna, LA.: Pelican, 1994.

Alderson, Brian. *Ezra Jack Keats: A Bibliography and Catalogue*. Gretna, La.: Pelican, 2002.

Engel, Dean and Florence B. Freedman. *Ezra Jack Keats A Biography with Illustrations*. New York: Silver Moon Press, 1995.

Wheeler, Jill C. *Children's Illustrators: Ezra Jack Keats*. Edina, Minnesota: ABDO Publishing Co., 2005.

A selection of books illustrated and written by Ezra Jack Keats:

A LETTER TO AMY Harper & Row, 1968 (Now Viking)

APT. 3 1971 (Now Viking)

CLEMENTINA'S CACTUS Viking, 1982

DREAMS Macmillan, 1974 (Now Viking)

GOD IS IN THE MOUNTAIN Harper & Row, 1968 (Now Viking)

GOGGLES! Macmillan, 1969 (Now Viking)

HI, CAT! Macmillan, 1970 (Now Viking)

JENNIE'S HAT Harper Collins, 1966 (Now Viking)

JOHN HENRY, AN AMERICAN LEGEND Pantheon Books, 1965

KITTEN FOR A DAY Macmillan, 1974 (Now Viking)

LOUIE Greenwillow, 1978 (Now Viking)

LOUIE'S SEARCH Four Winds Press, 1980 (Now Viking)

MAGGIE AND THE PIRATE Four Winds Press, 1979 (Out of Print)

MY DOG IS LOST! or MI PERRO SE HA PERDIDO (coauthored with Pat Cherr), Crowell, 1960 (Now Viking)

ONE RED SUN Viking, 1998

PET SHOW! Macmillan, 1972 (Now Viking)

PETER'S CHAIR Harper Collins, 1967 (Now Viking)

REGARDS TO THE MAN IN THE MOON Four Winds Press, 1981 (Now Aladdin Books)

SKATES! F. Watts, 1973 (Out of Print)

THE SNOWY DAY Viking, 1962

THE TRIP Greenwillow, 1978 (Now Viking)

WHISTLE FOR WILLIE Viking, 1964

Websites

www.thejewishmuseum.org/exhibitions/the-snowy-day-and-keats-exhibition
Exhibition overview

www.ezra-jack-keats.org/
Ezra Jack Keats Foundation website

www.thejewishmuseum.org/keatstimeline
Timeline of Ezra Jack Keats' life

www.lib.usm.edu/~degrum/
The de Grummond Children's Literature Collection at The University of Southern Mississippi houses the complete archives of Ezra Jack Keats.

www.bcri.org/index.html
Birmingham Civil Rights Institute website

www.civilrightsmuseum.org/
National Civil Rights Museum website



Ezra Jack Keats

***Shantytown*, c. 1934**

Ezra Jack Keats Papers, de Grummond Children's Literature Collection, McCain Library and Archives, The University of Southern Mississippi