

## Eric Carle Museum is picture perfect

Oct 12, 2015



*By Anne Bokma*

The best art galleries and art museums tend to be the ones that are works of art themselves.

Such is the case with The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst, Massachusetts. The sprawling (40,000 square feet), multi-faceted complex offers everyone who loves picture books the opportunity to experience them as never before. This is not a children's museum (though children love it), but rather, an art museum that celebrates picture books and readily welcomes children. The museum features exhibitions by current and historic children's book artists, such as Eric Carle, the museum's founder and namesake, as well as

an extensive 4,000-book library, an art studio and a 157-seat auditorium for storytelling sessions, concerts, films, lectures and live musical performances.

This is the only full-scale museum in the U.S. devoted to picture book art and it's drawn more than half a million visitors from around the world since opening in 2002. When I visited with my two teen daughters, I wondered if the place would be too "young" for them. Not in the least.

For one thing, there is the nostalgia factor. They both were thrown back happily upon memories of the great books and stories they grew up with. Books such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, one of Eric Carle's masterpieces (it's been translated into more than 62 languages and sold more than 40 million copies), *The Tiny Seed* and *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* were among their favourites when they were little.

The caterpillar figure and others like it are unobtrusively woven throughout the museum, along with variations on the colourful tissue paper collage theme so strongly associated with Carle.

During our visit, the east gallery featured an exhibition of work by the renowned Fred Marcellino, a Caldecott Medal winner for his highly polished and classically figured *Puss in Boots*. The art in this room was varied and exquisite, a nice balance of styles against the simpler, more impressionistic but no less satisfying work of Carle, rotating examples of which are on permanent display in the west gallery.

In the central gallery we found something different yet again, David Macaulay's *Black and White*, an utterly radical and uproarious celebration of the 25th anniversary of his book of the same name, considered by many to be the first postmodern children's picture book, with its ambiguous time frame and non-linear intersecting narratives.

Macaulay's exhibition, perhaps more than any other in the museum, illustrated how picture books can appeal to the imagination, feelings and intelligence of all ages. There are ideas, puns and puzzlings in *Black and White*, scheduled to continue to Nov. 29 that will keep adult brains amusingly tied up in knots, while at the same time accessible to kids.

The museum's light-filled open spaces and corridors, and the flowing layout of the galleries themselves, pull visitors along in an effortless journey through expansive areas that continually plop something new and delightful in your path. If you can't find any other guiding logic for the order in which you do the museum, simply follow the children — they seem to know instinctively where to go.

Smack in the middle of our gallery browsing we took in a reading — these are scheduled throughout the day — by a visiting author. In our case, it was Steve Light, showcasing his new book, *Have You Seen My Monster?*, a follow-up to his popular *Have You Seen My Dragon?* He not only read the book, but also took the audience through the process of illustrating it and answered many questions.

We watched a wonderful 20-minute film on Carle and his art and learned how, as a child, he became interested in insects, a curiosity sparked by his father, who took him on walks in the woods and fields, exploring the tiny creatures that lived there. "I remember the excitement of lifting stones or peeling back the bark of dead trees to discover the living things that crawled, crept, and scurried about there," Carle says in the film, which shows him meditatively cutting out pieces, laying them out in collage, painting them, re-adjusting them, continually at play, experimenting, adding touches here, taking something away there. A terrific glimpse into the way art gets done.

The museum's hands-on art studio, with staff artists to help, gives young visitors, their appetites now whetted, an opportunity to process in art what they had just absorbed within the museum's walls.

We spent a wonderful four hours in the museum and could have happily returned the next day for more. This is a fine example of how a museum can capture the imagination of kids and adults alike.





**If you go:**

The charming 49-room **Lord Jeffery Inn**, situated on a lush grassy common in the heart of Amherst, is a short drive to the museum and conveniently located to amenities.

**Atkins Farms Country Market**, located just a couple of minutes from the museum, is a local institution and a great place for breakfast sandwiches and to stock up on supplies for a picnic lunch.

There are plenty of **family-friendly dinner options in Amherst**, including Judi's (try the famous popovers with homemade apple butter), Arigato Japanese Restaurant (yummy bento boxes) and Pasta E Basto (heaping portions).

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