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Ways Of Perceiving

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What Was the Golden Age of Illustration?

Throughout this essay, I will be looking at the Golden Age of Illustration, what it was and the artists that defined it. To begin, I will look at what the Golden Age of Illustration was and how it came to be. I will then research its most popular artists and conclude my writing by summarising what I found. The Golden Age of Illustration was where illustration flourished because it was where some of the most influential illustrators came to be. I plan to look at the writings of Colin White, Nadia Cohen, Dalby Richard and Edward D Nudelman. The illustrators I plan to look at are Beatrix Potter, Edmund Dulac and Jessie Wilcox Smith.

The Golden age of illustration took place between 1880 to 1930. During this period, we saw many renowned illustrators emerge, most of whom still influence both budding and experienced illustrators today. There are many factors that brought upon the Golden Age of Illustration. One being the rise in popularity of old folktales. The return of the popularity of folktales can be traced back to Andrew Lang and Joseph Jacobs. Both of whom wrote about and collected folklore (Dalby 1991, p.7). The most significant reason for the onset of the Golden Age of Illustration though is the introduction of photomechanical reproduction. Previously, wood engraving was used as a way of producing prints. This was extremely inefficient however as multiple blocks of wood would be engraved for a single coloured print. In the 1890's, coloured halftone printing emerged as a new photomechanical printing process. This allowed for coloured prints

to be efficiently mass produced (Brigid 1975, p.7). This was revolutionary and is still widely used by major publishing companies today. Another catalyst for the Golden Age of Illustration was George Cruikshank. According to Dalby (1991, p.7), George Cruikshank was the first artist to pave the way for the Golden Age of Illustration. Contrary to previous illustrators, George Cruikshank's illustrations were highly detailed and followed the text completely. John Ruskin, a famous art critic from the Victorian Era, loved Cruikshank's work and in some ways believed him to be superior to Rembrandt.



Figure 1: *Frontispiece: The Tailor Mouse* (Potter, 1902)

Despite there being several illustrators who helped to define the Golden Age of Illustration, the most popular was certainly Beatrix Potter. Beatrix Potter, perhaps inspired by her hatred of London and its high society, found her greatest inspiration to be nature. She was a self-taught artist and would spend hours studying wildlife. To do this she would often sneak various animals up to her room to study their behaviour and features. Additionally, she would also sit outside to draw and observe nature. Her main way of studying was creating scientific illustrations of different plants and animals.

Cohen (2020) says

“She would sit for hours quietly watching frogs leaping in a stream or closely studying mice washing their whiskers. With each passing summer afternoon she spent gazing at the animals, her imagination began to run riot.”

However, her career and passion were not only deeply looked down upon by London's high society, but also by her mother. Many suspect this to have inspired her most popular stories of the rebellious Peter Rabbit and his antagonist, Mr McGregor. The Tale of Peter Rabbit has sold over 50 million copies worldwide and is one of the bestselling books in history (Waldrep, 2010). She was also heavily inspired by John Everett Millais' painting Ophelia and loved Shakespeare. Millais was a friend of her father and would sometimes offer her advice and praised her observational skills (Cohen, 2020).

As seen in Figure 1, the majority of her characters are charming anthropomorphic critters. She primarily used ink, watercolour and pencil in her work. I think her love of animals becomes very clear even in her simplest of illustrations. In Figure one, we see a mouse using a spool as a seat to read the newspaper. In this piece it is visible how she has given the little mouse character in the way they peer over their glasses and cross their legs. I also love how she uses the spool as the seat. I think it's really endearing and shows just how small in scale the mouse is. Whilst researching her illustrations, I came to find that she was amazing at capturing little details and the copious time she spent studying wildlife is evident.

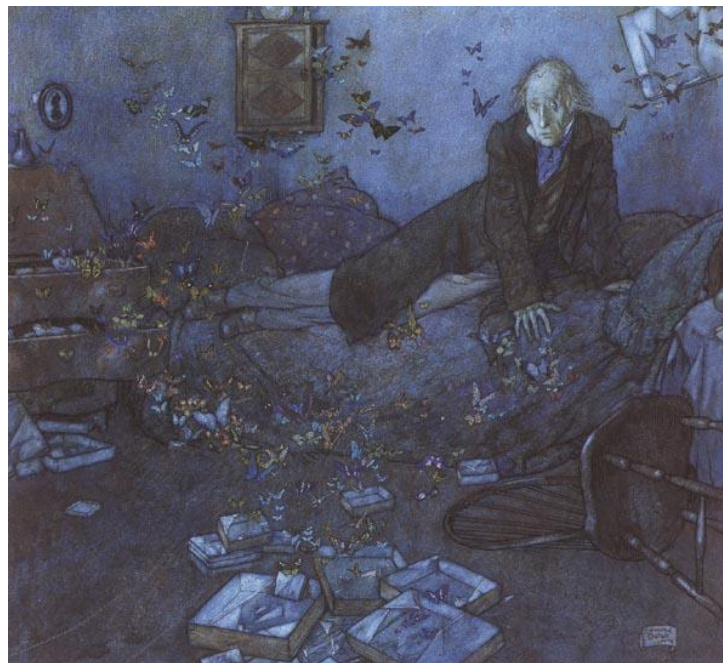


Figure 2: *The Entomologist's Dream* (Dulac, 1909)

Edmund Dulac was another prominent figure in the Golden Age of illustration. He was a French illustrator known for his dreamlike watercolour illustrations. However, he was also a skilled realist artist and created beautiful ink illustrations. His distinct style was heavily influenced by Japanese Wood Block prints and developed as he studied them. Furthermore, Dulac also looked up to English artists popular during his youth. These artists include William Morris, Aubrey Beardsley and Walter Crane. He would also carry out quick studies of interesting figures he saw on the street and filled several sketchbooks full of studies of Art Nouveau and impressionist pieces. Although he illustrated several books, poems and magazine articles, his most renown collection was for *Arabian Nights*. White (1976, p.28) talks about how Dulac created the dreamy atmosphere of these illustrations by over damping the paper and blurring the watercolours. White also discusses how he painted with Indigo, Marine and Prussian Blue with parts of violet and purple to create the whimsical feeling of nighttime. These techniques are a famous staple of his work and are seen in Figure 2.

“When Dulac's entomologist awakes, we can't be sure that he is not still dreaming, maddened by unleashed knowledge that can only be fully grasped in liminal states.”

(Carter 2026)

Figure 2 tells the story of *The Entomologist's Dream* where a man is unsuccessful in finding a red butterfly to impress his lover. After years of searching, in a state of

madness he wrecks his collection of butterflies. However, much to his surprise the butterflies fly away. The next day he's found dead. Dulac captures the Entomologists state of mind well as we can see the torment and confusion written in his expression.

The blue colour palette really amplifies this and gives the work a dark, bleak atmosphere. I really like this piece and it's the piece that stood out the most for me while researching his art. The way he creates highlights and manages to create contrast even with such a small colour palette in my opinion is really impressive. I also love the effect of all the butterflies frantically scattering throughout the room, leading the viewers eye through the image. His work is vastly different from Beatrix Potter's yet both possess a quality that makes them feel like they're from the same time.



Figure 3: The Pink Bonnet (Smith, 1907)

Jessie Wilcox Smith is one of the most prolific American illustrators in history. Over her career, she illustrated over 400 magazines and published 60 books. She also illustrated countless handkerchiefs, calendars and prints. Moreover, she was also an acclaimed portrait artist later in her life. She worked in multiple different mediums such as watercolour, gouache, ink and oil paints. However, despite using many different mediums, she kept the warm, soft quality of her style throughout her work. The main focus of her work was children. To study them, she would spend hours watching children play, analysing their expressions and behaviour and translating these in her work. Maternal scenes were also a huge staple of her work as for 15 years she illustrated every cover for Good House Keeping magazines (Dalby 1991, p. 40) She was a huge believer in women being domestically inclined and I think her passion for this is really evident in her work.

Smith's beliefs can be seen in Figure 3, where we see a domestic scene of a mother tending to her child's bonnet. Like almost all of her paintings on this particular subject, she has used warm delicate colours that invoke a feeling of warmth and nostalgia in the viewer. This piece caught my attention immediately from how gentle it is. This painting is full of little details like the flowers on the girl's bonnet and the lace on the cuffs and collar on both the mother and daughter. Jessie Wilcox Smith's skilful anatomy also shows through in this piece in the gesture of the mother's hands and in the girl's stance.

Through her skill she has managed to gain the admiration from many. This was shown by Edith Emerson, quoted in Nudelman (1990, p.46), when she said at Smith's memorial exhibition "With unerring directness and sure instinct she has touched the heart of the people and it is there that we must seek to find her special shrine"

In conclusion, The Golden Age of Illustration was where illustration's finest and acclaimed artists came to be. There were many catalysts that brought upon the Golden Age of Illustration, the most notable being the development of colour printing techniques. However, illustrator George Cruikshank and the rise in popularity of folklore were also important factors in the onset of the Golden Age. From my research, I found countless highly regarded and skilled artists from this era. However, decided to focus on the illustrators that are the most highly regarded. These include Beatrix Potter, Edmund Dulac and Jessie Wilcox Smith. All of whom have left a lasting impact on the world of illustration.

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