

# Portrait of an Artist as a Young Mouse

## Introducing Kids to Art through Books

BY JANE BRESKIN ZALBEN

What does it mean to become an artist? To make a life filled with art? To stay true to yourself whether your work is revered or criticized? To do what has meaning? These are the questions I explored in my latest book *Mousterpiece: A Mouse-Sized Guide to Modern Art*.

Art has been my life since I was little. It is who I am. It is a huge part of what I live for. And so it is for the mouse, Janson, the heroine of my recent picturebook, who discovers what it is to be a true artist. Her name is in honor of H. W. Janson, whose *History of Art* was “the bible” for every art major in college, questioning, “Why is this art?”

I was once asked, “Why present art for such a young age as you did in your book?” This is my answer: “Why not?” As soon as I could hold a crayon in my hand, I fell in love with drawing. It is a world I could escape to—a world of my own that I could see through my eyes.

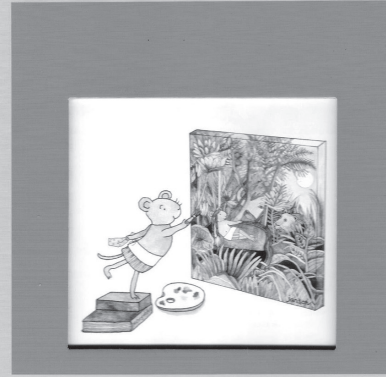
My mother was a children’s book librarian later on in her life in a school for children with special needs, but I think she secretly had a passion for art. By the time I was five years old, she took me every weekend from Queens, New York, into “the city” to the Metropolitan Museum of Art for art lessons. I would paint all morning. Downstairs.



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# Mousterpiece

A mouse-sized guide to modern art



JANE BRESKIN ZALBEN

Afterwards, we would have burgers in the cafeteria. On rare occasions, when they still had a Roman pool with massive columns and classical sculptures upstairs, we would have lunch, and I would throw a penny in the pool and make a wish. If it still existed, I know what my wish would be—to become a famous artist. (Who knew many years later I would have a show in a gallery on the second floor for my book *Jabberwocky* there?)

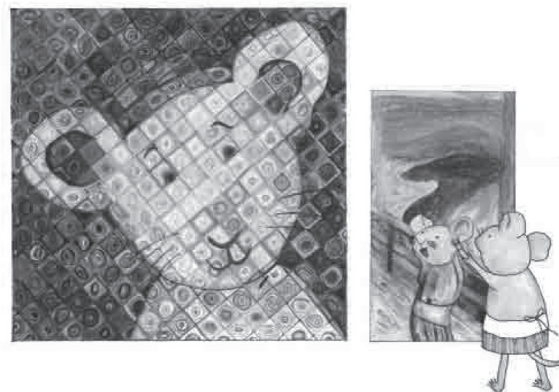
In the afternoon, we would first visit the American wing filled with stuffy old furniture, like the room where Janson resides. Then we’d venture out each week to the other galleries within the building until we made our way to modern art. And my world opened, exactly like the story in the book, to art.

What happens in childhood is an important foundation for a life that is lived. I sometimes wonder if a teacher or parent or that someone who influences or mentors or inspires realizes how potent a moment can become. My first-grade teacher allowed me stay during recess to paint. I guess I was a detail person even then. A perfectionist.

Before the class came back from lunch, she taped my wet painting of a striped bell, still dripping—definitely an homage to the modern artists I had been exposed to—to the front door of our classroom. To this day, I consider that my first one-woman show.

So Janson worked on her pictures  
and left them in an empty room each night,

until one by one the walls were filled with art.  
The more she painted, the happier she became.



Janson is inspired by Vincent van Gogh, Salvador Dali, Chuck Close, and Edvard Munch.

Years followed with more art lessons in basements; a sixth-grade scholarship to Pratt Institute, where I studied linoleum cuts; The Art Student's League at twelve to begin my first portfolio, life drawing nudes (don't ask)! Because I knew I wanted to go to the High School of Music of Art for piano or art, and decided music made my hands sweat when I performed. You had to take a test; I got in!

Instead of my local high school, I traveled three hours a day to Harlem and back, where I learned that I preferred dating musicians and would rather be an artist. (I've saved that for my young adult novels!) So what began as a seminal education in my development as a child now became the basis for an actualized dream—to make something out of nothing, like Janson. To make art.

College was a turning point. My painting teacher, originally a paint chemist, had studied color field theory with Josef Albers. (Notice the cover art of *Mousterpiece*, done like a frame of his squares, and the first spread is done in his style.) My teacher for two-dimensional design was sculptor Richard Serra, and my drawing teacher was Marvin Bileck, the illustrator for the 1964 Caldecott Honor Book *Rain Makes Applesauce*.

I was suddenly exposed to the physicality of children's books—beautiful parchment papers, slip-cased embossed bindings with silk ribbon markers, marbled endpapers, frosted vellum over a bordered title page, ragged eggshell colored pages, typography with all its varied typefaces, even the space between the art and the text—as they say in music—the notes not played. The grace notes. The pauses. My path changed to books. Sideways. Still art.

My second education was working in publishing. My first job was at Dial Press for the editor in chief, Phyllis Fogelman, who had been Ursula Nordstrom's assistant at Harper. Her art director, Atha Tehon, had designed (as a freelancer) many of Maurice Sendak's books and said to me, "I will teach typography. And everything I know."

The first editor on my picturebooks, Susan C. Hirschman, editorial director at Macmillan, had been her other editorial assistant. And so my life in children's books began when I became a book designer at several large houses, working for Anne Beneduce, who became my other editor (as well as Eric Carle's!), and then I ultimately became an art director at Scribner's, which I left to live a life making children and making books.

This is really the condensed answer to the question of "why expose children to art?" Particularly modern art. For me, anything you expose a young child to—music, dance, art, drama, or sports—stays with them for the rest of their lives. But for me personally, art, which seems to be one of the first things to be eliminated in a school system program, is one of the last things that remains in any civilization.

When I visited schools over the decades, I have asked children how many like to do art; most hands jut up in the air, both boys and girls without hesitation. There is a sense of joy in expressing oneself so freely without judgment. Aren't we too often graded, tested, and reviewed from childhood on? So why not have something that is so much fun?



Book party decorated mouse cookies.



Replicated art from inside the *Mousterpiece* book onto cookies.

I remember being asked to visit a school, and the art teacher said, “I want you teach the children how to make a tree.” Now I could draw trees until the day I die. The crevices, the gnarls, the lyrical limbs. But she had her own ideas—her idea of a tree.

It never worked out. I wanted the children to have freedom of expression. Would Matisse’s tree be like Picasso’s tree? Or any abstract expressionist’s tree? Who is to decide what a tree should be? Would it even look like a tree if some modern artists called it one?

## Images Plus Language

I also want to discuss language in a picturebook. Each word in any picturebook is important. Like a brushstroke in art, like a musical note in a score, like a line in a poem, you work and work until you narrow it down to its bare essence.

Since I also write novels, I felt I wanted the picturebook, like many of my books, to work on two levels—one for the child, and one for the adult. I wanted an arc to the story.

### Art Activities Based on *Mousterpiece*

1. Read the story and show the pictures. Discuss the artists in the back matter. Show the thumbnails of each within the book and what real work inspired it. Show side-by-side. Use a different artist each day or week, focusing on one style and movement.
2. Have the class or group draw, paint, or color and cut out circles, squares, triangles, tiny dots and squiggles, any shapes they choose. Glue to paper.
3. Draw your own mouse character and make original modern art using different materials, such as oil crayons, regular crayons, paint, pastels, oil pastel crayons, colored pencils, or Magic Markers. I have used sand, grass, leaves, petals, fabrics, wool, feathers, bits of herbs and seeds, Windex spray on oil paint, and detergents (baking soda, Comet, vinegar) to add texture. Adult supervision is, of course, necessary if chemicals are used.
4. Hang students’ art on the wall. Have a show in the classroom or library “gallery” with an art opening (including punch served with little cocktail umbrellas, just like Janson). *Note: Do not invite “critics!” Positive reinforcement only!*
5. Roll out long blank paper, newsprint, or canvas for the entire group to work on as one. Have children drip paint on surface to show action painting of Jackson Pollock. *Optional: Cut out stencils and attach ahead of time: a mouse, rabbit, a bear, and so on to have some white space within the painting, like Janson did. Drip around stencil.*
6. Make cookies and “paint” them with icing or sculpt adding: sprinkles, licorice tails, sugar crystals, roasted almond ears, chocolate dot eyes, and so on.
7. Go to the adult section of the library. Use oversized art books to introduce children to art alongside picturebooks about art. Talk about feeling comfortable in museums and galleries and “experiencing” art. I began taking my children as infants. Many museums and libraries are now doing programs in art education centers for young children.

When Janson discovers modern art, she infuses herself as a mouse into each major work of art that I depicted. So children might not necessarily understand that Andy Warhol did a series of soup cans—the parody and riff of placing Janson’s face on one saying, “Campbell’s Cheddar Cheese,” but they laugh at the image along with the adult who might get it on another level. They see Frank Stella’s stripes, and I say simply, “stripes.” He never did a shaped canvas with a mouse. Neither did van Gogh have a mouse in the clouds of his “Starry Night,” or Dali a surrealist mouse floating over cheese, and so on, but it is a way to celebrate art movements with an audience of varied ages.

Everyone smiles and knows about trying to “paint inside the lines,” like a Mondrian, and “dripping paint everywhere outside the lines,” like a Jackson Pollock. Most likely, a young child doesn’t know Kandinsky or Klee or Miro, but they know “squiggles and wiggles,” and maybe they can learn a bit about them from rendition of this art as I did it as if Janson were painting it—through her eyes.

Chuck Close never did his grid portraits of a mouse, nor was Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* a mouse! So making it all referential was another way to expose children to the great artists of the past with simplicity in the text, and a bit of humor tossed in.

The turning point is when the museum closes for renovation and Janson is bereft and must now rely on herself. Will she succeed? And flourish? That is, of course, the eternal question for anyone

in the arts—to create your own distinct voice in the world . . . and will people listen? As an artist you are alone most of the time, isolated, working, so it is always a surprise, even to this little mouse, when she reveals her work—Ta Da!—to the public.

At the end, I have included nonfiction back matter (“Janson’s Favorite Artists”) explaining (as succinctly as one possibly could) the major art movements of the twentieth century in a few sentences (no easy task!). These artists influence our present ones in this new age of installation art, video, and performance pieces where various forms of media and the arts are joined together.

In the end, one librarian told me that *Mousterpiece* is not only about art. She felt it was about doing what you love. Finding your passion. Mine is art . . . and writing. Making children’s books. To wake up, be alone in a room with the process: thinking, dreaming, working—that my joy.

My first book was published exactly forty years ago. It is still fresh for me. I have told friends I would like to die with my head hunched over a drafting table or smashed on my laptop, writing. Hey, what a way to go—making ART or WORDS. It doesn’t get any better. Well, maybe a nice meal. Or music, or comedy or architecture. I guess creating a life that has meaning that maybe a few others will enjoy and appreciate, too.

That is what my little mouse, Janson, discovers. A bit like Jane. 🐭

## Bibliography

### Becoming an Artist

This is a rather unorthodox list on being an artist. But these books are about becoming a sculptor, a painter, a carver, whether you are a mouse or a gorilla or a human, and what it means to exist in the world through your eyes and mind, to be an artist deep in your heart.

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