

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Art Lessons

'Mousterpiece' and 'Sky Color'

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.



From "Mousterpiece"

By PAMELA PAUL
Published: August 22, 2012

As public schools across the country shutter their arts programs in favor of grueling test prep instruction, children's picture books are helping make up for the loss. Two sweet new books, "Mousterpiece" and "Sky Color," continue what seems to have become a kind of crusade to teach children the value of artistic self-expression.

MOUSTERPIECE

Written and illustrated by Jane Breskin Zalben
40 pp. A Neal Porter Book/Roaring Brook Press. \$16.99. (Picture book; ages 3 to 7)

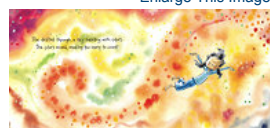
SKY COLOR

Written and illustrated by Peter H. Reynolds
32 pp. Candlewick Press. \$14. (Picture book; ages 3 to 7)

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From "Sky Color"

In this particular world, everyone knows that mice, as much as any other rodents, enjoy scampering around kitchens scaring the heck out of people, but what they really like to do is make art — see: Leo Lionni's "Matthew's Dream." Janson, the mouse in Jane Breskin Zalben's "Mousterpiece" (named after the art historian H.W. Janson), has the advantage of living in an actual art museum, "tucked into the corner of a room filled with beautiful old furniture."

When Janson explores, she starts to emulate the style of the treasures she finds, going through what has become the picture-book art history curriculum: from pointillist dots to Rousseau's jungle to Warholian portraits, with detours into Braque Cubism, Matisse cutouts and Kandinsky color. As in so many recent books, from "Olivia" to the more recent "Scribbles and Ink," by Ethan Long, each style and school is represented on the page by a downsized rendition of a

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celebrated artist's work. Naturally, Pollack (horrified though he might have been at the prospect of being turned into a preschool staple) is included as well. Happily, in the end, Janson discovers a style of her own.

This theme also animates "Sky Color," by Peter H. Reynolds. This is the third book in Reynolds's Creatrilogy series, which also includes "Ish" and "The Dot." But each story stands alone. Like its predecessors, "Sky Color" is all warmhearted, multihued sweetness. Little Marisol is an artist, confident in her abilities, eager to express herself and full of ideas. Her biggest problem, if you can call it that, is that she doesn't have any blue to paint a new mural for the school library.

In this upbeat, rainbow world, such problems are neatly solved. Looking around her, Marisol realizes that not all skies are actually blue. Just as not all children, as Marisol's group of multiethnic friends wordlessly makes clear, are white. When Marisol finally paints her portion of the mural and a boy asks, in confusion, "What color is THAT?" Marisol's response is emphatic. "That?" Marisol said. "THAT is sky color." And who would dare tell her she's wrong?

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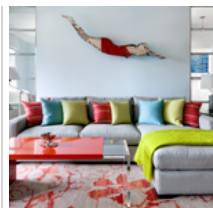
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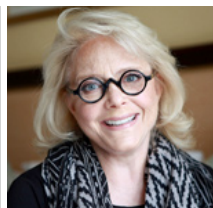


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