A SMALL WORLD

Mary Blair, The Troubled Heart of Walt Disney's Dream Factory

A Book Proposal by Joan Maltese

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Overview

When the world wanted a genius, it went to Walt Disney. When Walt wanted a genius, he went to Mary Blair.

Born October 21, 1911, Mary Blair—the artist hand-picked and held in unparalleled esteem by Walt Disney himself—suffered from addiction and family tragedy while creating some of the brightest and most joyful designs of the twentieth century and dominating Disney artistry. Mary was a unique and extraordinarily prolific talent, working almost entirely from her imagination and rarely consulting references for her designs as most concept artists do. Moreover, her work was strikingly distinctive and yet free of purely stylistic impositions; she simply painted what she saw. But it wasn't her only achievement that her hand produced some of the finest inspirational elements of the Golden Age of Disney animation as well as an Imagineering wonder—a candy-colored train with one square wheel, a gravity-free drawing room where a pinafored Alice beholds her up-side-down reflection in a mirror and her yellow hair stands straight up in the breeze, and a world of lavender hippos, sparkling giraffes, salmon mountains, mocha skies, and blue volcanos breathing delicate coral flames. She was also a rare woman in a man's world, frustrating an elite creative team that struggled to execute her concepts to Walt's satisfaction.

Mary's career includes some years outside the Disney studio in children's book illustration, theatrical set design, fashion design, and print advertising. While she worked with her characteristic boldness and flair in the commercial art world, it was a far cry from the fine art she had dreamed of creating as an idealistic young art school graduate. She gratefully accepted Walt's invitation to return to work for him on the 1964 New York

World's Fair, a phase during which she found her ultimate fulfillment and achievement in designing the wildly popular attraction, "it's a small world."

She also married a fellow artist who, like her, inherited a corrosive dependence on alcohol. It took a toll on her talent and her family; her two sons fell into delinquency and drug addiction, which culminated in criminal and schizophrenic episodes that cost Mary her dream home in New York. In addition, Walt Disney's death in 1966 was a terrible blow for Mary, emotionally and professionally. With the exception of one foray into a live action movie for another studio, she never got a job again. In her final years, instead of creating the fine art she had sacrificed for financial security, she passed her days watching television in a state of alcoholic dementia. She died on July 26, 1978 of a cerebral hemorrhage.

But Mary's art endures. Within the entertainment world, her influence is legend; outside the studio doors, hundreds of millions of amusement park visitors and movie-goers who don't know of her existence serve as testaments to her appeal. As Disneyana enjoys an endless wave of popularity—with books, films, prints, and every conceivable type of merchandise celebrating Walt, the "Nine Old Men," Disneyland, and the glory days of 2-D animation—Mary Blair remains an unsung heroine. Her story is waiting to be told, not only for the artists and fans who revere her, but for the huge general audience that loves to meet extraordinary talents, to go behind the scenes of iconic organizations, to follow momentous personal trials, and to discover the shapers of our world who are hiding in plain sight.

The internationally recognized John Canemaker, who compiled an appreciation of Mary's work in book form after years of clamoring by directors and artists who return to the Disney archives for Mary's inspirational sketches to this day, wrote: "Mary Blair and her art

deserve greater renown; her ultimate gift—bringing instantaneous pleasure and delight to the viewer—is rare in any age and eternally welcome."

Author Bio

I have worked for over twenty years as a freelance technical and business writer, counting among my clients the New York City Council, a federally-funded research and development center sponsored by the Department of Defense, and such Fortune 500 companies as DuPont, Diageo, Viacom, Hewlett-Packard, and Sony Music. I am also an enthusiastic world traveler and language learner, having taught English Medical Terminology at the medical school of King Saud University in Riyadh and worked for over a year and a half at China Central Television in Beijing, where I wrote, edited, and voiced English-language news. I wrote an exposé on the latter experience, which was published by Newsmax in July 2003 (not my favorite publication, but they were willing to print the article immediately and in its entirety). I received my Bachelor's degree in English from UCLA, and did graduate work at UCLA and the Monterey Institute of International Studies. I currently reside in San Diego, California.

Author's note: Like millions of people, I was a longtime Mary Blair fan without realizing it. I became formally acquainted with Mary Blair's work through my sister, Cristy Maltese, an artist who has worked at Disney studios on *The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin,* and *Pocahontas* among other classics. Thanks to Cristy, I've heard Mary Blair's name many times over the years, but my eyes were opened to Mary's unique talent and influence in the spring of 2012 when I helped Cristy create some presentations on art and animation for a Disney cruise. She devoted a special segment to Mary Blair—the only artist she singled out and named. She spoke of Mary with joy and awe. Seeing Mary through the

adoring eyes of an adored sister planted a seed. I asked her recently what type of book she would like to read—a Mary Blair biography, for instance. I was shocked when she said she'd love to read Mary Blair's biography, but that none had been written. The seed took root and sprouted.

Research and Writing

In addition to the dozens of books I have already read on Mary Blair's art and Walt Disney's animation studio and his "Imagineers," planned research includes the following:

Interviews: I have already conducted interviews of dozens of relatives, acquaintances, co-workers, neighbors, and intimates of Mary and her husband, Lee. My subjects so far include Disney Legends Floyd Norman, Alice Davis, Marty Sklar, and Rolly Crump.

For more casual, insider testimony on Mary's influence and stories of her work for Disney, I will rely on my contacts in the animation industry, particularly with artists of the second Golden Age of Disney animation, who drew on Mary Blair's work for inspiration and who maintain her artistic reputation. I will also reach out to key collectors of her work and to her colleagues and relatives of colleagues who have preserved letters, clippings, and memories.

For more formal expertise on Mary's art and influence, I will seek commentary from teachers at the influential art schools in the Los Angeles area (including Cal Arts, the successor to the Chouinard Art Institute). I will also contact critics and historians such as Susan M. Anderson, Robin Allan, Karal Ann Marling, and John Canemaker, who have provided commentary on Mary's work. I have spoken to Paul Sylbert, an Oscar-winning Art Director and winner of a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Art Directors Guild.

For stories and background information on Lee's successful career as a producer of television commercials in the 1960s, I have enlisted the help of Jane Maas, a real-life "Peggy Olson" and the author of *Mad Women: The Other Side of Life on Madison Avenue in the '60s and Beyond.* Ms. Maas has offered me several names, and strategies for finding more.

Archives: I have already been given unusual access to the Walt Disney Studios Animation Research Library by Disney archivist Lella Smith, and to other Disney archives containing Mary's work. The archivists are aware of this project and eager to participate.

I will also request access to the following archives:

The Walt Disney Imagineering Archives in Burbank, California, which include employment records, letters, ephemera, and other correspondence

The John Canemaker Animation Collection in the Fales Library & Special Collections of New York University

The Chouinard Files at the Cal Arts Library

The Perine Collection, which contains Chouinard ephemera

Other sources: The context (and some details) of Mary's career are described in numerous histories of film and animation, Disney biographies, and memoirs. The Chouinard Foundation is a source of information on the Chouinard Art Institute and Mary's teachers such as Carter Pruett, Millard Sheets, Morgan Russell, and Lawrence Murphy. The California Watercolor Society and numerous books, museums, and galleries of California Regionalist Art will be useful sources for describing the context of Mary's early attempted career in fine arts. The Society of Illustrators in New York, of which Mary was a prominent member, will be a useful source on her and Lee's work in the commercial art world between 1953 and

1963. I have also found evidence of Mary's work at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology.

I will work with historical societies in Oklahoma, Texas, Maryland, Kansas, and California to reconstruct Mary's ancestry and early life.

Writing: I will deliver a draft of 80-100,000 words and will include a piece of artwork to introduce each chapter, and as much additional artwork as the publisher deems appropriate. I will consult with editors, collectors, and archivists to select pieces with subjects meaningful and recognizable to lay readers as well as some that have had relatively little exposure, in order to bring them to light and to avoid overlap with pieces widely pinned on the internet. I tentatively plan to include a glossary of terms, in keeping with the book's objective of appealing to lay readers and explaining the process of animation and the world of the professional commercial artist.

Marketing

The largest and most natural audience for this book will be hundreds of millions of Disney fans as well as general readers who enjoy the stories of real people whose work has literally shaped and colored our world. Although its subject matter will occasionally be dark, the book will be of interest to aspiring young artists and suitable for teenaged readers. The intent will be to educate and entertain a lay audience, but it will also satisfy the wishes of professional artists who have gleaned what they can about Mary Blair from her body of work and from anecdotes circulated by word of mouth and scattered throughout published sources.

I do not envision this as a book primarily for animation fans, which would limit its appeal; such a book would typically consist of artwork on every page with accompanying

text, and exhaustive descriptions of process. Rather, I wish to make this an engaging read with supporting photos and art that will show, as well as tell, the story of an artist's life.

Promotion: I will promote the book throughout the world via every medium possible, including promotional tours as my publisher sees fit. In addition, I will market the book on social networking sites. If the Walt Disney Corporation wishes to be part of the project, I will assist by doing presentations and lectures at theme parks, cruises, schools, and other venues it chooses. I will also promote the book to such organizations as Women in Film and Women in Animation, where I will do guest presentations if requested. I will also do signings at historical societies in Oklahoma, Texas, New York, and California.

Foreign markets: With the virtual ubiquity of the Disney brand, the book should sell in every foreign market. Mary is well known overseas. In August 2009, a Mary Blair exhibit in Tokyo was wildly successful not only because of the art, but also because of the intrigue in Mary's pioneering independence as a woman who rose to the top of her field. This appeal will extend to other female readers worldwide. In 2011, Google created a "doodle" for Mary's 100th birthday, raising global awareness of her.

Beyond the book: Mary's story is a natural property for a film rights sale, with its dramatic highs and lows, its characters and settings that audiences would love to see portrayed on film, Mary's unique personal style (she was a snazzy dresser who surrounded herself with beautiful things), and Hollywood's love of making movies about itself. The December 2013 release of *Saving Mr. Banks*, a movie about Disney's production of *Mary Poppins* starring Tom Hanks as Walt Disney and Emma Thompson as P.L. Travers, may pave the way for more movies based on true stories about the life and times of Walt.

A final note: The Walt Disney Corporation recently took the unprecedented step of allowing the use of Mary Blair's name for advertising and marketing when it licensed some of her "it's a small world" designs to popular accessory manufacturer Le Sportsac. Mary's brand is rising.

Competition and Similar Works

The only book devoted to Mary Blair is John Canemaker's 128-page "appreciation," *The Art and Flair of Mary Blair*, published by Disney Editions in 2003. Out of print since then, the book is scheduled to be reissued in February 2014. Copies are prized; selling on Amazon.com for approximately $200. Canemaker's appreciation consists mainly of reproductions of Mary's art, with supporting biographical and critical material. Details of Mary's personal life (especially her problems) "require a fuller discussion than is possible in this volume," Canemaker writes. *Mary Blair, The Troubled Heart of Walt Disney's Dream Factory* will provide that fuller discussion.

Sample Chapter

Chapter One: Simple Beginnings

Mary Blair obeyed her talent as well as her demons. Although both were great, she seldom talked of either; she virtually never bragged or complained. Instead, she poured her energy into the creation of a whimsical and joyful world while accepting the shaping and twisting hands that others laid on her own life. What details of her ancestry and early childhood she consciously absorbed into her identity we cannot know, since she seldom talked of them either. Family and tradition undoubtedly meant something, however; when her first child was born, she named him Donovan Valliant.

Mary's maternal grandfather, Thomas Rigby Valliant, struck out from his hometown of Easton, Maryland as a young man in the late 1850s, landing in the Kansas Territory. It might have been the gold boom that drew him to Atchison County—a place where the streets were "black with the swarms of Pikes Peakers" in the eyes of one observer, while its crumbling shores, sluggish river, and forests of skeletal cottonwood trees made it "the picture of ideal desolation" in the eyes of another. In fact, Thomas Rigby Valliant would not find fortune in this trying land, and he would not stay long. Micawberish and tender in nature, he had neither passion nor talent for gold, but rather for faith, fellowship, and politics. He briefly clerked in a dry goods store, then followed his ardent Democrat beliefs to fight for the Confederacy in the Civil War. When that was over he made his way to Platte County, Missouri to join a friend from his Atchison days. There he married Margaret Darst in 1867.

Young Margaret had spent her entire life in the small town where she wed Thomas, but as his wife she would soon be on the move, with an expanding brood and shrinking fortunes. Her husband took her to Kansas and Tennessee and then back to Missouri, trying his hand at farming, merchandising, preaching, newspaper editing, and managing a lunatic asylum—everything but prospering. A friend would observe quaintly, "He was a good writer of sketches, proficient in rhetoric, but deficient in logic." Over a period of twenty years, Margaret bore him eight children. When the youngest, Varda, was eighteen months old, Thomas passed away, leaving the family penniless. "With so unselfish a spirit, he was always in pecuniary straits," eulogized the same friend. The widowed Margaret was more practical. She moved her family to St. Joseph, Missouri, a metropolis of a hundred thousand. There she earned money as a seamstress and supported her remaining children—only six had survived childhood. Over the years the young Valliants married, fanned out, developed careers of their

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own: a nurse, a buyer, a stenographer, an office supplier, a salesman, a homemaker. The last little one, Varda, reached adulthood and went to work tailoring clothes for the Hirsch Bros department store. By the time she was nineteen, Varda was doing well enough to move away from home and rent a room in town.

Meanwhile, young Varda had something like a counterpart back in her late father's hometown of Easton, Maryland. A young man named John Donovan Robinson had also grown up fatherless, his mother widowed after bearing ten children in fourteen years. John was a small boy when his father died, and the house had filled with strangers and servants as his mother took in boarders to make ends meet. Coincidentally, Varda's parents had visited the town of Easton a few months before John's father died. It's possible the Valliants and Robinsons met, since both families were connected with the Order of the Freemasons and both were involved in local governance. Maybe there were letters and photographs and hints of opportunity for a young man who wanted to go west, maybe a correspondence was begun. No evidence of any prearrangement survives, but around 1908 John turned up in the obscure locale of McAlester, Oklahoma, where Varda was living with her widowed mother and two spinster sisters. Varda Morton Valliant and John Donovan Robinson, age 20 and 30, were married in March of that year. John moved into the small home headed by his new mother-in-law, bringing the head count to five. In November, John and Varda made it six with their first-born, a girl called "Peggy."

John proved to be a good drinker and a middling provider. He might not contribute much from his wages as a bookkeeper for a local brick and tile manufacturer, but his female in-laws could make up the difference. The Valliant women trained, studied, invested, and worked. On October 21, 1911, John and Varda welcomed fraternal twin girls: Augusta

Valliant and Mary Browne (after Browne Robinson, a brother of John's who had died in childhood), bringing the household to five adults and three babies. Moving time had come. It wasn't far—just to a house nearby—but it didn't bring stability. The stalwart widow Margaret died in 1916, leaving John and Varda both parentless. Then the Robinson family was temporarily separated as John went off alone to work in the small coal mining town of Le Flore, 54 miles away.

Then, in October 1917, the McCleskey No. 1 oil well blew in Ranger, Texas. Crude gushed over the top of the rigging for four weeks and started filling 1,700 barrels a day. Dirt farmers got rich overnight and the town swelled from a population of a few hundred to tens of thousands as fortune hunters streamed in from all over the country. The Robinson family took note. Moving time had come again. John, Varda, and their three little girls fetched up in Ranger; as always, they were following a contingent of Valliants.

But like many booms, the Ranger oil one was short-lived, enriching few and disappointing many. The Ranger Valliants would stay for almost ten years in the acrid air and eternal throbbing of engines, but the Robinsons left around 1924 for California's central coast. Yet another contingent of Valliants had already drifted out to the wide, green-and-gold valleys of Santa Clara and San Joaquin—fertile produce fields lying against the eastern slopes of the Santa Cruz mountains with San Jose glittering and jigging just up the highway for anyone with an auto and a hankering for a night on the town, and the scenic shores of Monterey to the seaward. It was the home that young Mary, who was showing a surprising talent for art, would come to love.

The family took up residence in Morgan Hill, a humble town of about 650 amidst orchards and mountains that hugged the El Camino Real. Social life revolved around the

churches, the baseball season, and the harvests of apricots and prunes. Housewives gathered in groups like Stitch 'n' Chatter and Ladies' Aid, and young people entertained themselves with hay rides, picnics, fishing, hanging at the drug store soda counter, and swimming parties. There was little luxury in the town, but there was enough cumulative taste and wealth for the selection of the renowned architect William H. Weeks to design the elementary school, a beautiful landmark in the California Mission style. Mary and her twin sister "Gussie" probably attended for just one year before graduating in 1925.

The California Valliants were doing well, owning homes, raising families, and farming, but the Robinsons were just scraping by. Home was an apartment attached to The Friendly Inn, a "community house" in the center of town where John had obtained the post of manager—the duties were mostly janitorial. The twins shared a bed. There were no fancy department stores where Varda might get work tailoring, but she did earn money by taking in sewing. Even food was sometimes in short supply. Still, the Robinsons made room for extras. Varda made robes for the priests at the local Episcopal church where the family were parishioners, and she helped migrant workers and families.

The oldest daughter, Peggy, was soon married and gone, but Mary and Gussie found that socially speaking, they were well situated in The Friendly Inn. With the place located at the main intersection of town and used for pageants, dances, and festivals, the twins were always in the center of things, happy and fetching in their fine homemade dresses. Their looks and gaiety brought them admirers and comparisons to movie stars. Mary, one boy longingly thought, looked like Greta Garbo. The twins' particular chum was Virginia Horton, another outgoing and bright girl who knew exactly what she wanted to do with her life: be a

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librarian. She would excel to the point that towards the end of her life, a bronze statue of her would be cast.

Mary was also a scholastic achiever, although not necessarily an overachiever; with about 25 students per grade at the local Live Oak Union High School, everyone had something to do. Mary served as vice president of the freshman class, edited the literary magazine, acted in plays, sang in the Glee Club, and presided over the Girls League. Driven by her passion for art, she also demanded and got funds from the meager family budget for supplies. “Dad will just drink it up anyway,” she argued. At some point she decided to pursue the same career as her art teacher, Bertha Bevier, who had attended the State Teachers College in San Jose. In 1929 Mary graduated at the head of her high school class. She gave the valedictory speech on “Self-Destiny,” a theme she would follow unevenly in the years to come.

Along with sister Gussie and their chum Virginia, Mary began classes at the State Teachers College in the fall of 1929. The highway bus made it an easy commute, carrying the girls the twenty-mile trip along the El Camino Real from The Friendly Inn to the campus. Mary majored in Fine Arts and engaged her talent and sociability in various capacities: serving as Art Editor for the yearbook, doing illustrations for the school’s literary magazine “The Quill,” and joining the Smock ’n’ Tam club, the YWCA Council, and the Sigma Tau society. She painted portraits of friends and faculty as well as the college president, Dr. T. W. MacQuarrie. She competed for a chance to exhibit a charcoal still life at the Fresno convention of the Pacific Arts Association, and won. This early success of “Miss Mary Robinson” was noted in the *San Jose Mercury News,* for which the slender girl posed in an artist’s smock, with her dark blonde hair pulled back in a fashionable chignon.

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Another triumph for the young artist lay just ahead. After two years at San Jose State College, Mary knew that finer institutions could take her further—if only she could afford them. The Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles was only ten years old, but its prestige was established and its tuition was expensive. Mary sent in her portfolio and waited anxiously. The notification came: she was admitted, and she had been granted a scholarship. Another article, another photo appeared in the *San Jose Mercury News*, this time with the caption, "On the Road to Fame."

It would be prophetic, but she was not only on the road to fame; she was on a new road altogether, one that would take her away from her old dreams of following in the steps of Bertha Bevier and reveling in family life. Just a few years before, Mary and her playmates had never set their sights beyond local boys and local opportunities. With their narrower horizons, Mary's sisters Gussie and Peggy were starting families and careers that would keep them close to Morgan Hill their entire lives. Virginia, ever-intent on her librarianship, was destined to enjoy a long marriage and to practice her profession with diligence and honor in a small rural town in California for many years. Mary on the other hand was being pulled away from all that by a talent greater than her knowledge of the world, greater even than her curiosity about it—but to the big city she would go, for the sake of her art.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One: Simple Beginnings

Mary Browne Robinson was born in the tiny town of McAlester, Oklahoma on October 21, 1911, to John and Varda Robinson, completing the family at three daughters. John was a fine drinker but an indifferent provider. He clerked at various businesses in

Oklahoma and Texas before settling his family in the small agricultural town of Morgan Hill, California around 1924. Home was a small apartment behind an establishment called The Friendly Inn, where Mary shared a bed with her twin sister. Below stairs, John worked as a janitor, providing meager support from the leftovers of his drinking budget.

While Mary had to sacrifice financially along with the rest of the family, even scrimping on food, she was flush with artistic and intellectual gifts. She rose to the top of her high school class and entered the State Teachers College in San Jose with a dream of becoming an art teacher. Otherwise shy and unassuming, she did obey her talent. Thus she applied to the elite Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles when she was twenty years old. Her letter of acceptance—and a scholarship—opened the door to a new dream of fine art and fine living.

Chapter Two: Love and Learning

The Chouinard Art Institute was the brainchild of Nelbert Chouinard, an artist who knew that while she would never be a great painter, she might be a great teacher. In fact, she founded a great school, recruiting masters of illustration and composition to her teaching staff. One of Mary's favorite teachers was Pruett Carter, the man whose steamy depictions of modern romance sold women's magazines by the millions. He was a strict teacher who insisted that students work through their meal breaks and demanded narrative in every piece. Mrs. Chouinard was also skillful in her choice of students: Milford Zornes, Phil Paradise, Phil Dike, and Millard Sheets (creator of Notre Dame university's "Touchdown Jesus" mural) would go on to undisputed greatness.

The tall, graceful, green-eyed Mary Robinson found love as well as learning at Chouinard. She and another student—the boundlessly confident, boastful, ambitious, and handsome Lee Blair—fell in love. Claiming ancestral ties to Carrie Nation and Francis Preston Blair of Blair House fame, Lee was charged with a sense of destiny, and he saw in the talented Mary a mate with whom he could fulfill it. The two began an artistic partnership— and rivalry—that would last most of their lives.

Chapter Three: Selling Out

Idealistic and innovative, Chouinard students Mary Robinson and Lee Blair joined the newly-forming California Regionalist school of painting. Followers took advantage of the local climate and moved out of their studios and into "plein air" to depict scenes of urban and agricultural life that included people, animals, and plain grit. Lee was a motivator, a bold organization man who made things happen: at the age of twenty, he won the 1932 Olympic Gold Medal in art (a category of competition that has since been eliminated). This curse of early success he exacerbated by becoming president of the California Watercolor Society at the age of 23.

But Mary and Lee, along with all the California Regionalists, had the misfortune of blossoming in the Depression, when the market for fine art was nil. Upon graduating from Chouinard, Mary went back to the apartment behind The Friendly Inn in Morgan Hill. Down in Los Angeles, Lee went to work in Hollywood with a distinct sense of selling out. But his first job as a lowly "in-betweener" at the animation studio of Ub Iwerks did allow the young couple to marry, in March of 1934. Over the next five years they would exhibit and teach, but

mostly animate in various Hollywood studios, building their reputations and fortunes largely outside the world of fine art they had once set their hearts on.

Chapter Four: The Mouse Factory

Lee joined Walt Disney's animation studio in 1938. It was Walt's personal dictatorship, a place where various prodigal talents were nurtured, killed, found, lost, fed, or starved, depending on whatever else they brought with them—luck, adaptability, and compatibility with Walt being three necessities. What distinguished the Mouse Factory from other studios was the uncompromising dedication of its head, Walt Disney, to quality. His groundbreaking 1937 production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was a monumental risk backed by years of intensive artistic study and invention, as well as sacrifices of sleep and income from Disney artists. Walt's innovations included pillars of the process that every animation studio utilizes to this day, one of them being the initial stage of "blue sky" visual development, in which particularly fine artists were hired to produce inspirational sketches for successive artists who would design characters, create layouts and backgrounds, and animate.

Despite Mary's superior talent, Lee was generally the trailblazer in the partnership. In 1940 he got her a job at the studio, rescuing her from another studio where a particular animator, Joe Barbera, was sexually harassing her. At Disney, Mary breezed straight into the elite—and elitist—Story Department on the second floor, where she would specialize in visual development, a placement that immediately pitted her against the animation group, already enshrined as Walt's "Nine Old Men." Animators often resented the primacy of the visual development artists, even though animators' work was what admiring audiences

actually saw onscreen; “vis-dev” sketches were destined to be viewed only in meeting rooms and cubicles, and then interred in studio archives or simply lost.

To worsen matters for Mary, she was a woman in a male-dominated environment and she was known to be a superior talent. She produced inspirational watercolors for several features: *Dumbo,* a *Fantasia* sequence that was discarded, and a couple of features that seemed to be years from seeing the dark of the cinema. Although Mary’s work was fine enough to keep her out of the trenches of in-betweening and the “convent” of the all-female Ink and Paint department, the subject matter wasn’t leading her to her artistic heart and much of her work was languishing unproduced. After a scant nine months, Mary quit in disgust.

Chapter Five: South American Breakthrough

Mary and Lee had built an architectural dream home in North Hollywood, where she quietly resumed her fine art while Lee brought home the bacon. She managed to exhibit in galleries and one important show, but the market for fine art was still dry. One day, just three months after she had quit Disney, Lee strolled in from work and announced triumphantly that he had been chosen for a small group of artists and musicians who would take a three-month trip with Mr. and Mrs. Walt Disney to various South American countries as part of President Franklin Roosevelt’s “Good Neighbor” policy. Walt, the world-renowned creator of beloved characters and cartoons, would promote his country as well as his products to territories where the Nazis were trying to court allies. The accompanying Disneyites would gather inspirational material from raw life and from folk and classical art to be used in cartoons that would promote cross-border relations. Mary’s talent pushed her once again. From the margins of unemployment she demanded, and got, a coveted place on the trip.

For three summer months in 1941, Disney's group danced the samba, crossed perilous suspension bridges over sacred rivers, stuffed themselves with local foods, met schoolchildren and poets, watched gauchos rope horses, visited village markets, partied at glittering nightclubs, sailed on balsa-wood boats, and composed and sketched the days and nights away. And high in the mountains, beneath the Andean sun, Mary literally saw the light. *The light,* she told a friend years later, was the thing that changed what she saw. She not only found a signature style, she experienced a rush of productivity. Her new, distinctive work featured bold, improbable colors and shapes, conveyed with an inimitable charm and whimsy that was perfect for Disney—both the brand and the man himself. When the artists returned to the studio, Mary yielded a trove of paintings and sketches that would strike Walt's eye and place her at the top of Disney artistry for years to come. Walt selected one of her South American sketches to hang in his home, the sole piece of art he would ever take from the studio for his personal collection. Mary was not only back at Disney—she was on top.

As for Lee, he was known around town as "Mr. Mary Blair." It wasn't what he had in mind when he had wooed Mary to their artistic partnership, so he joined an organization where Mary could never best him: the US Navy. Mary put her dreams of "glorious family life" on hold. It was 1941, and neither she nor Lee wanted their babies to be war orphans.

Chapter Six: Mary Blair Everywhere

Lee was stationed on the East Coast for several years, making educational training films. Mary became a bi-coastal commuter, dividing her time between Lee's station in Maryland and the Disney studio in Burbank.

The war had hit the studio hard, depriving Disney of his vital overseas market. With funds desperately short and 95 percent of studio output absorbed by education and propaganda films for the US Government, Walt had to delay the features he had been planning after *Snow White* and *Pinocchio*. Diversifying his products would be the only way to progress or even survive artistically, and the ever-forward-looking Walt knew he couldn't rely on the stars who had built his empire—the Duck, the Goof, the Mouse. Audiences had changed, tastes had changed, and the heyday of the Silly Symphonies and Mickey Mouse cartoons had passed. Walt would have to find a new star to shine through the five percent of his commercial output and keep audiences loving Disney. That star would be Mary Blair. Walt assigned her to create designs, styles, and colors for the short subjects and musical packages that would be integral to his brand in the 1940s. Mary dominated Disney artistry during these critical years. Her work perpetuated the studio's vast edge in quality and distinguished it with an inimitable style. The South American films *Saludos Amigos* and *The Three Caballeros,* stamped with Mary's vibrancy, were hits on both sides of the border and arguably saved the studio from bankruptcy.

Walt sent her to Mexico for more Latin subjects and to various Georgia locations to research the technically and artistically experimental *Song of the South.* Titles such as *Make Mine Music, Once Upon a Wintertime, Melody Time,* and *So Dear to My Heart* are not familiar to today's audiences, but they vitalized Disney's brand. Mary had privileges few artists in the studio achieved: free access to Walt's office on the near-mystical third floor of the Burbank studio, and design credits on film after film. Walt was an unflinchingly faithful family man, refusing to so much as glance at the pornographic drawings his artists sometimes

whipped up for their own amusement, so the success of pretty, affable Mary was undeniably a credit to her art; at Disney Studios, being a favorite of Walt was better than sex.

Mary was achieving celebrity outside the studio, too. The home she and Lee built in North Hollywood was featured in *House Beautiful*. She was adept at filling her world with art and applying her aesthetic to her personal trappings and her environment. Always anxious to please, she also found a way to fit in socially: she and Lee had taken up the industry practice of schmoozing and boozing.

Chapter Seven: The Big Apple

After the war, Lee didn't care to resume life in Mary's shadow in Hollywood, so in 1946 he joined the wave of Hollywood animating talents who were migrating to New York. While many of them struggled, working out of their homes for gigs and freelance assignments, can-do Lee prospered and set up shop in the heart of Manhattan, specializing in educational films for military, corporate, and institutional clients. He hired such newcomers as Andy Warhol and Pablo Ferro and his own brother Preston Blair, another animation star. Ever the ambitious organization man, Lee would raise his profile by founding the Film Producers Association of New York and serving on its board of governance for years.

In yet another industry where three-martini lunches (and sometimes breakfasts) were the norm, Lee distinguished himself as a drinker. Few people could understand how Mary could tolerate her eternally drunken husband; unlike her father, who had been an amiable drunk, Lee could be insolent and sloppy. But unbeknown to many, Mary was sheltering her emotions in a quiet, barely visible drinking habit of her own. Meanwhile, she continued to commute from coast to coast and to supervise Disney artwork. Theatrical shorts opened with

Mary's name in the credits, hits narrated by Sterling Holloway that kept Disney's name up in lights.

The girl from tiny Morgan Hill was prospering and exploring the best of Manhattan. Liberated from the confines of corporate life, she forged a snazzy personal style, smoking cigarettes with enamel holders, wearing custom-made clothing, elegant hats, and brightly framed glasses. She adopted a pale-blonde pageboy haircut that set off her suntanned face.

She also moved forward on her long-delayed dream of motherhood. In February 1947, at the age of 35, she gave birth to her first child, Donovan Valliant Blair. But family life wouldn't trip along for her the way it had for her contented sisters and friends back in California. Mary's accommodating nature and near-obsession with visual experimentation were not compatible with the daily, hourly demands of motherhood. She shut out the routine conflicts of family life, and all the Blairs would pay the price.

Chapter Eight: Fairy Tales

Mary and Lee continued to prosper. They enjoyed hitting Port Washington on weekends to sail their boat, the *Valliant.* Their second son, Kevin Lee Blair, was born in August 1950, completing their family.

Back in Hollywood, Walt Disney had been able to return to feature-length cartoons, and Mary began to draw and paint concepts for *Cinderella*. Trouble set in again. Walt was enamored of Mary's joyful and eye-popping designs as well as the emotional innocence and appeal of her sketches, but the abstract and "graphic" style she had forged in South America, ideal for the whimsical shorts of the 1940s, was virtually impossible to incorporate into the Disney feature style—the "illusion of life" that his animators had laboriously pioneered for

the breakthrough classic *Snow White*, and that Disney audiences had come to expect. Walt championed Mary's designs to frustrated and resentful animators, who were caught between the rock of Mary's style and the hard spot of the Disney look. Still, one joyful and startling sketch after another flew off Mary's desk as the studio moved ahead on *Alice in Wonderland* and *Peter Pan.* The inevitable artistic compromise favored the animators. Mary could barely recognize her work in the "Disney-fied" finished products. To make matters worse, two of the three features were critical and box office fizzles. Walt had often complained that *Snow White* had boxed him in. His magnificent debut of a new art form, hand-drawn 2-D animation to compete with live-action cinema, was so successful that he could never equal it; some critics maintain the zenith (unequalled even today) had been reached in 1940 with *Pinocchio.* Walt was already gazing hard at another horizon. Live action, television, and an idea he had for a family park were pulling him away from large-scale animation.

Four days before *Peter Pan* opened in February 1953, Mary resigned.

Chapter Nine: $uccess

In New York, Lee had partnered with a live-action producer and expanded his business to television commercials. A range of resilient characters and flexible talents had hit the town to break new ground in the art of selling goods and services to American consumers. Over at the production studio of Elliott Unger Elliott, the petite and lively Elinor de la Bouillerie was transforming the image of the American housewife from a frumpy galley slave to a chic, clever kitchen wizard who charmed Betty Crocker cakes out of her gleaming oven. Eileen Ford set up business with a telephone and a desk, and created the modern modeling industry. Lee's production company boasted the services of ambitious directors

like Michael Cimino and Pete Tytla who were, bringing the art migration full circle, using their commercials to make demo reels to take to Hollywood. His studio now occupied the entire floor of a Lexington Avenue office building, and his clients were the biggest advertising agencies in town, his business counterparts the maddest of "Mad Men."

Pete Tytla says that in the end it was all business—but a fellow employee insists that Tytla brought in clients with his bachelor parties and costume orgies on Manhattan's East Side. The television producers in the ad agencies enjoyed being wooed by men like Lee; he spent a good deal of time out of the studio and was rarely sober. "I never saw him draw a line," laughed one of his employees. But his efforts paid off. Lee's studio produced the famous "Does she or doesn't she?" Clairol ads for Foote, Cone & Belding. His directors made Maxwell House Coffee perk to a tune that imitated the bubbling of a percolator for Ogilvy & Mather (Lee even claimed credit for the melody, but then so did David Ogilvy). His animators made Charlie Tuna swim and Campbell's Soup kids smile on cans of Chicken Noodle. The biggest agencies and accounts were Lee's: he produced commercials that pitched the products and services of Procter & Gamble, Thom McCann, the New York Telephone Company, United Air Lines, Duncan Hines, Dristan, Lipton Tea, Shell, Neet, and Absorbine for clients like Young & Rubicam, Doyle Dane Bernbach, and J. Walter Thompson.

As for Mary, she rose to stardom in the New York commercial art world just as she had in Hollywood. She dipped her toe into fashion design, and sold to Bonwit Teller. She illustrated children's books, and got an admiring letter from Jackie Kennedy. She designed Christmas and Easter sets for Radio City Music Hall. She designed sets and costumes for a Duke Ellington Broadway musical (unproduced, alas). As a freelancer, she designed print ads

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for Meadow Gold Dairies, Baker's Cocoa, Blue Bell children's clothing, Nabisco, Johnson & Johnson, Pepsodent, Beatrice Foods, and Pall Mall cigarettes. She worked with Lee's business from time to time, and clients would specifically ask for her to be on the creative team. His co-workers found her charming.

But trouble was brewing at home. Lee had laughingly resigned himself to being "Mary Blair's husband," but he was hardly "Kevin and Donovan's dad." He was disappointed in his young sons. Donovan, while artistically talented, was academically slow. Kevin, conversely, was bookish but socially awkward—the opposite of the dynamic Lee. At work, Lee was mostly a jovial drunk but at home he could be an abusive one, striking his sons and passing out cold at the dinner table. As younger boys they were entertained by model airplanes and toy rockets, but when they entered adolescence they discovered drugs. The Kings County police blotter tells a story that seems entirely separate from the powerhouse of talent and industry of Mary and Lee: regular visits to the Blair home, at all hours of the day and night, oftentimes to order a stop to the blasting music and one time to neutralize Donovan, shouting at the top of his lungs and swinging a scimitar in the middle of the street. One neighbor said the boys were obsessed with weapons, and buried live cats.

Mary's eyes, so keenly focused on the aesthetic possibilities of her environment, passed right over Kevin and Donovan's problems. And her mind was elsewhere. Over the years, she had found her own escape: into art, into alcohol, into the light intellectual addictions of Scrabble and gossip. Passive in the face of her personal problems, she exhibited no will to discipline troubled children or to correct Lee's bad parenting. Instead she spent her mornings on her work, her afternoons on gin, and her evenings in silence—or "oblivion," as

one observer said. Another of Mary's friends would compare her to Alice in Wonderland herself, lost in her fantasies of the happy home life that eluded her.

Chapter Ten: Mary's World After All

Back at the Mouse Factory, Walt had given birth to a new form of entertainment. His latest enterprise, Disneyland, was not only wildly popular, but a triumph of crowd management, technology, and environmental design. Other empires took note. In 1963, PepsiCo turned to Disney to design the exhibits for its UNICEF Pavilion at the New York World's Fair. Walt accepted, planning a tribute to the world's children. But the project's significance for him reached well beyond its stature as a World's Fair exhibit, even with his prominent sponsors. He was contemplating another huge risk: a second, bigger, prodigiously expensive Disneyland in Florida. The question was, would it draw East Coasters? The heavily themed, beautifully kept park in Southern California, with its imitation turn-of-the-century Main Street and elaborate indoor rides, might not draw the more sophisticated East Coast crowd. At the World's Fair, Walt needed to sell the quintessential Disney experience of efficiency, fun, fantasy, and artistry, and to convince New Yorkers along with tourists seeking a New York experience that *this* was the thing they wanted. But he was dissatisfied with the concepts coming out of his creative team in California. With opening day eleven months away and not a sketch or model approved, he placed a call to Mary Blair.

Mary may have been content as a New York illustrator, but she was ecstatic when Walt asked her to design the attraction. Walt envisioned an enclosed boat ride that would take passengers through various "lands" where children would sing and dance in their native

costumes. Mary would create the look, with Disney's most talented sculptors, model makers, costume designers, and set designers selected to execute her designs.

She flew out to California to join the team at Walt's new "factory," the Imagineering lot in Glendale. She produced development art for craftsmen and -women who would themselves go on to become official Disney Legends: Rolly Crump, Alice Davis, Marc Davis, Harriet Burns, Blaine Gibson, and Wathel Rogers. Robert and Richard Sherman, the songwriting brothers who had written the hits of *Mary Poppins*, composed the background music. The huge project was designed, built, shipped to New York, and assembled on deadline. Walt took the risky step of charging admission for the ride, which might cut into attendance, but he thought the quality warranted it.

The result was a smashing success; "it's a small world" was one of the most popular exhibits at the World's Fair for two years running. Walt's theme park idea was not just a California success story. His plans for Florida's Walt Disney World went forward, and eventually three more Disney theme parks were added in Europe and Asia. Of the four attractions Disney created for the World's Fair, only one—"it's a small world"—would be installed at all five parks. It continues as a favorite, a particular distinction since it has no film "tie-ins" to bolster its popularity. Richard Sherman calculates that its background ditty is the most frequently-played song on the planet. The Blair elements that had flummoxed Disney animators—Mary's hallucinogenic colors and shapes, her fantastical scenes, and the wide-eyed child characters that have collectively come to be known as "the Blair kid"—literally took shape in a world of her creation that has become one of the most popular entertainments in the world.

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Chapter Eleven: Downhill

Walt Disney died in December 1966, devastating Mary emotionally and professionally. She was griefstruck. Also, her drinking had been noted, as had its effect on her rapidly foundering talent. Her once-vibrant colors were becoming muddy, and she couldn't articulate her ideas. After she completed the few projects Walt had given her before his death—murals in Disneyland and the Jules Stein Eye Institute at UCLA, over which she also had the creative control she had so long desired—she received no further Imagineering assignments.

A friend's recommendation got her a job doing color design on the 1967 film version of the Broadway smash *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. The film's wacky, eye-popping colors were signature Mary, and audiences were dazzled by her visuals. But more savvy professionals barely took note. Mary's color was splashed onto dull architecture and costumes, and the story itself did not translate well enough from the stage to make the movie particularly memorable. Contemporary reviewers commented mainly on the humor and the source material, not the visual style. As a consultant for an art director who was already well established, Mary would have had little power to create the entire look of the film. Still, while *How to Succeed* wasn't the best use of her talent, it indicated the potential for great work if she had remained in Hollywood and gotten the right projects. As it turns out, *How to Succeed* would be her sole foray into live action. For those who care to look, it survives as an exemplar of analog film processing in an age that reveled in the possibilities of color—a visual experience that today's audiences, consumers exclusively of digital technology, cannot have.

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The coup de grace was a psychotic episode experienced by Donovan Blair. It came as a shock to Mary and Lee after years of denying the depth of their son's problems. They would spend a fortune on rehabilitative programs for him. In 1970, they were forced to sell their New York dream home with Mary's custom-designed studio. They moved to the town of Soquel, California, just on the other side of the mountain from Morgan Hill and close to Mary's sisters with their youthful families. It was an adjustment, but not an escape. In their new home, Donovan ran down a hallway one night violently swinging a pickaxe at doors and walls, making his way towards Mary and Lee's bedroom. They escaped through a window and ran to neighbors to call the police.

There was no escape through work either. Mary put together a portfolio and showed it around in San Francisco, but young art directors considered her passé. Lee taught at local colleges. Undauntable as ever, he would sober up for good when he was sentenced to a year in jail for drunk driving. He even transformed his year of confinement into a productive experience, enlisting his fellow inmates to make an animated film behind bars and learning to cook. But passive, unassuming Mary obeyed the demon. Her drinking and her overall condition worsened.

Lee continued to paint, to make new artist friends, to entertain, and to tolerate his sons—he was still not a demonstrative father. He cared for Mary in a way; he was solicitous with her and he relieved her loneliness by getting her out of the house from time to time. But after an unsuccessful attempt to put her through rehab, he turned her completely over to her addiction and supplied her with liquor for the rest of her life. Alcoholic dementia degraded her cognitive, motor, and language skills. The graceful young artist who had danced the samba in Brazil now used a cane to walk and had trouble finding words. Old friends barely

recognized her. People meeting her for the first time were baffled by her appearance and behavior, or assumed she had suffered a stroke. One day she slipped and fell, causing a blood clot to form in her leg. Months later, on July 26, 1978, a terrible headache came over her and she asked Lee to take her to the hospital. She was diagnosed with a cerebral hemorrhage. A few hours later, she slipped into a coma and died.

Chapter Twelve: Immortality

Mary never died at Disney studios. As the years passed, artists of all levels of skill and authority, from the lowliest animation assistants to the most senior art directors, continued to draw inspiration from Mary's colors and sketches. No other work had equaled the fantastical scenes that flipped light sources and juxtaposed colors that weren't supposed to be in the same frame much less layered against each other. In 1989, Disney Feature Animation had its first hit after a post-Walt era of critical and popular flops: a project Walt himself had contemplated decades earlier called *The Little Mermaid*. The box office success of *Mermaid* ushered in the Disney Renaissance and resurrected the moribund animation department, which doubled in size as more features were planned.

Mary's fantastic and unique designs were now pulled out of library drawers, pinned up, and marveled at by a corps of new artists. Quilted gardens, golden ships sailing beneath blue moons, anatomically-shaped caves and drawing rooms, tapestry-style settings, and scenes of tender drama, wistfulness, and joy were as fresh and surprising as they'd been in the 1940s and 50s. The new generation asked about Mary's experience at Disney and learned that she had been artistically and personally embattled in her day. Old-timers and newcomers alike gave her newfound appreciation and widened her fame.

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The awards rolled in. Disney Legends in 1991, Women in Animation in 1995, the Association Internationale du Film d'Animation in 1996, the National Fantasy Fan Clubs in 2003, and a Google "doodle" for her one-hundredth birthday on October 21, 2011. Today, Mary Blair exhibits and tributes sell out, the children's books she illustrated remain in print, and her name and designs have been licensed for popular merchandise. She is known around the world, virtually the sole Disney artist of the Golden Age outside the circle of animators whose name has gathered a following.

Epilogue

Lee Blair died in April 1993. Kevin Blair died in September 2008. Donovan Blair lives in a private facility. When Mary posthumously received the Disney Legend award in 1991, not one of them attended the ceremony.

But Disney artists had adopted Mary as their most beloved artistic ancestor. To this day, her work is the most frequently requested in Disney archives by artists and directors looking for inspiration. A much wider group of fans experience pleasure and delight when they look at her designs or ride "it's a small world." Her sunny immortality is a reflection of her relentless eagerness to please and to see the world as positive and wholesome, to the point that she closed her eyes to inner tragedies that brought a premature end to her talent and her life.

Sample Art and Photographs

Mary and Lee Blair, 1936

Mary Blair and Walt Disney in Rio de Janeiro, June 1941

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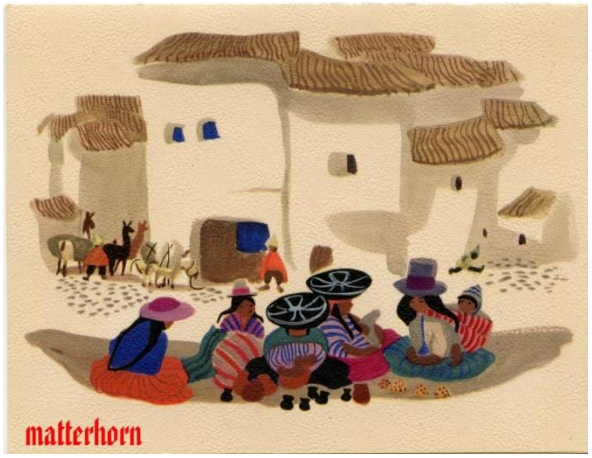
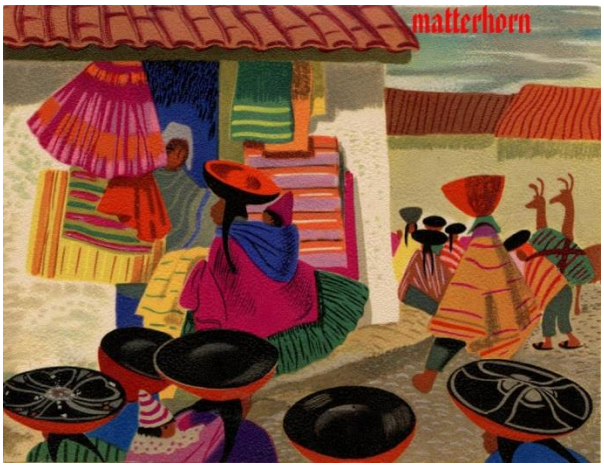




South American sketches

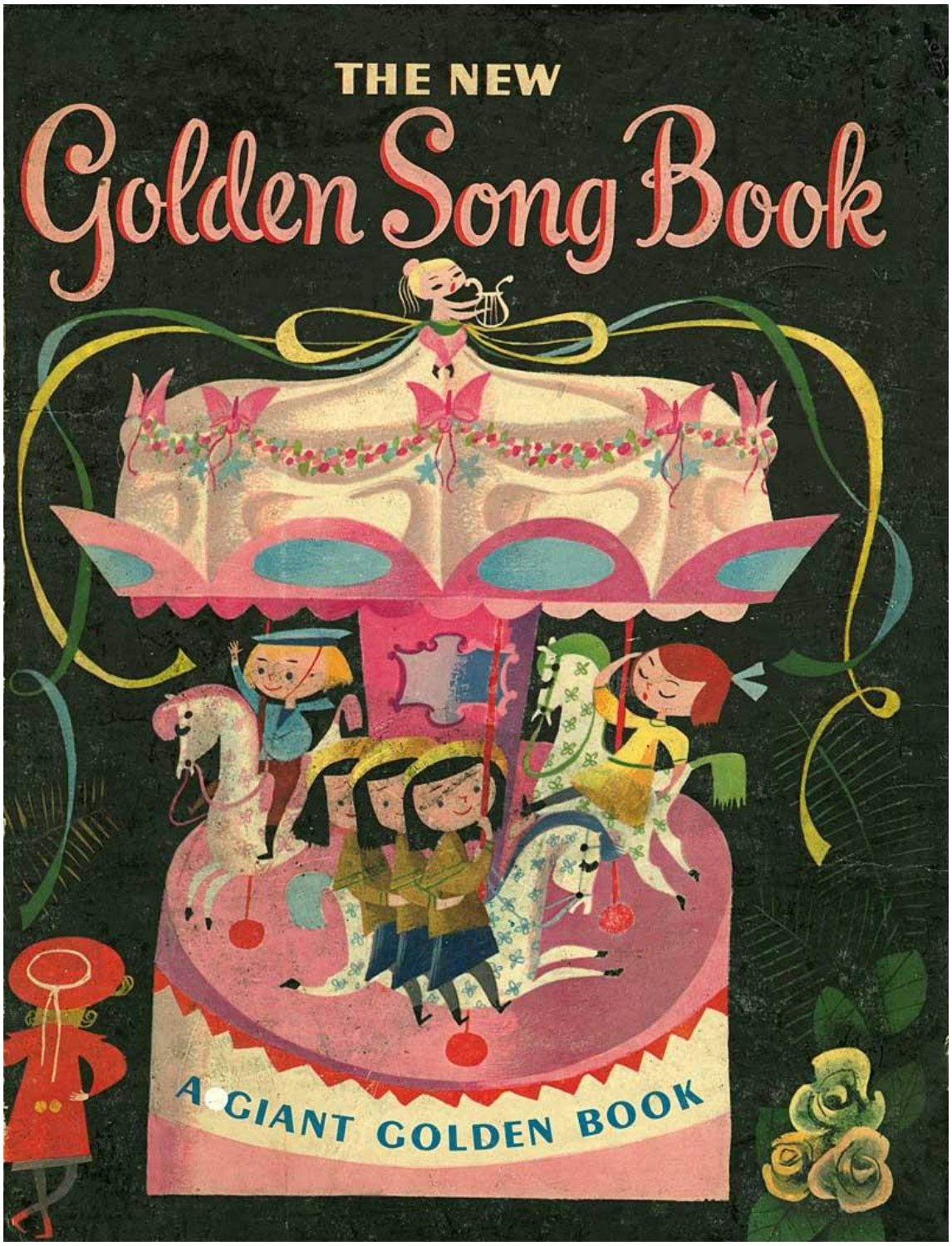
Concept art for *Song of the South*, released 1946

Concept art for *The Little House,* released 1952

Concept art for *Cinderella,* released 1950

Concept art for *Peter Pan,* released 1953

Art for Pall Mall cigarette ad



Children's book illustration

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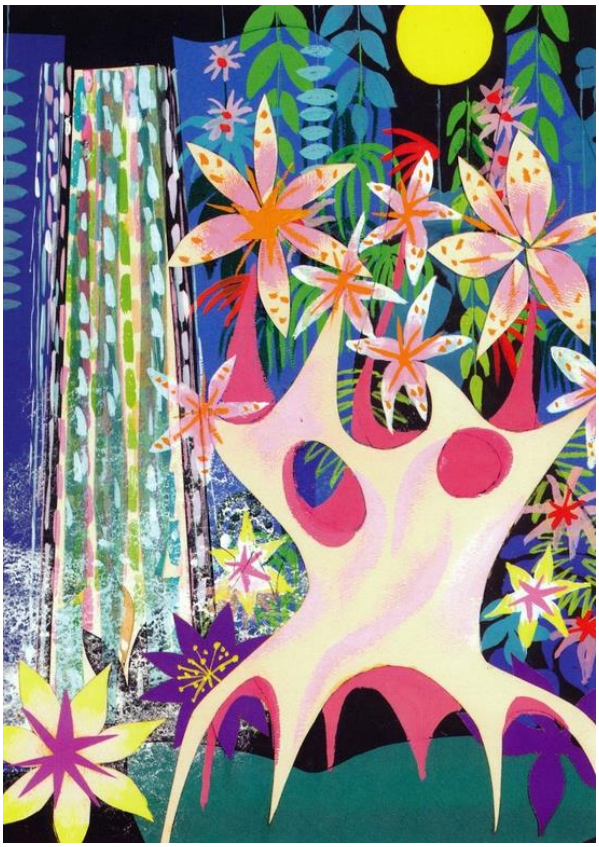

Concept art for “it’s a small world”

Publicizing “it’s a small world”: Mary and Walt with a Disney Ambassador

Mural by Mary Blair at Walt Disney World, with five-legged goat

Still shot from *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*