

**Short History of  
Book Illustration –  
Cezarina Caloian  
Book Review**

**Maria Bilașevschi**

Cezarina Florina Caloian, *Scurtă istorie a ilustrației / Short History of Book Illustration*, Artes Publishing House, Iași, 2020, 160 pages.



Today, when the profession of illustrator is not only highly desirable for the great reach it has among readers, but for its trend-setting features, a book dedicated to the topic of book illustration, *Short History of Book Illustration*, Artes Publishing House, Iasi, 2020, written by associate professor Cezarina Caloian, PhD, is a much needed resource as to identify the roots and the development of such an interesting, yet not widely known field of practice and study. The author's interest in this topic is not a coincidence. Based on the academic career and the artistic interest, this book, dense in information, comes as a very necessary tool for the academic study in the field of graphic art and also as an introduction for every curious reader to discover the fascinating expansion of human imagination through printing techniques.

Organized chronologically, the book is divided into sections that group chapters by era or purpose. Part One (Chapters 1–5) brings together illustration traditions, exploring the origins of illustration. The book begins with emphasizing some of the more traditional uses of illustration, carrying the reader through ancient Greece and Egypt, mentioning the use of materials and the peculiarities of the technique. It continues with a brief review of the Middle Ages approach, explaining the terminology used during that time to describe the artists and their repertoire of images and also the difference between the sacred writings and the secular ones. The writer introduces the

reader to a series of *Particularities* (chapter 1, section 1.1), specific to the Early and Late Middle Ages, analysing the art of decorating manuscripts from both an artistic point of view, and a social one, drawing between the mentalities and customs of different societies and centuries in regard to the advancement in ornament techniques. After presenting different manuscripts and their content, both aesthetic and ideological, the writer concludes that during this part of history, “the role of illustration was to popularise through image, the religious text” (page 32).

In the following section, we are introduced to the effects of Guttenberg’s revolution on printing. The natural progression from the illuminated manuscript to *incunable* is described with meaningful examples and the step to understanding the Renaissance rebirth over illustration.

Highlighting the most important changes in Renaissance, Cezarina Caloian offers an interesting approach on the field of interest, by introducing the reader to the various ways in which illustration was used for medicine, theatre, literature, science, exemplifying with images. We also find out the secular writings became more and more popular, but were “lacking the fantastic and described meaningless events or actions from the life of the middleclass” (page 51).

In sub-chapter 1.3. we are introduced to the refinement of children books and their direct connection to illustration. Even if we’ve seen in the previous part that these books were very illustrated, but there was little quality. Thus, we learn about John Newbery’s *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* (18<sup>th</sup> century) and the uprising of a style of books meant to attract readers with its sophistication and also about the Bewick family of illustrators that changed the way the woodprint was done until the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century. In this part we also find out more about William Blake’s engravings that are treated together with his poetry, with a new combination and understanding of word and image.

The author’s research of the illustration field broadens its interdisciplinary character while analysing the influences of the society behaviours depicted in the several books from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We learn that caricature-style illustrations designed during this century proved to be more important than the texts they accompanied, proving to be the start of mass-market literature. Moreover, the presentation of the art made by Gustave Doré, John Leech, Sir John Everett Millais introduces the reader to a new dimension of illustration. The milestones in shaping a new imagery of the childhood are provided with specific examples, such as the work of Kate Greenaway about who are noted the different innovations brought through drawing: attention to fashion as well as to the settings and “the idealization of childhood through the construction of angelic characters” (page 80).

A great importance is given to Walter Crane and the *Art and Crafts* movement. Through the presentation of the influences of the Japanese

traditional engraving and the medieval miniatures, we are introduced to the new ways of understanding how the illustrators saw the children perception and their need of colour and symbols in drawings addressed to them.

With the rapid industrialisation, mass production and urbanization, *Art Nouveau* conquered rapidly the late 19<sup>th</sup> century society. The explosion of printed media such as newspapers, novels, prints and illustrated books was a fertile ground for the sinuous lines and organic, nature inspired motifs of Art Nouveau, that resulted on a large number of book covers and *ex libris* bookplates. The established desires of the artists belonging to this movement were to merge the aesthetic values with the high standards of craftsmanship, thus being both beautiful and functional. In this light of understanding, with the illustrations of Aubrey Vincent Beardsley and Alphonse Maria Mucha the author describes both the principles stated above but also the innovation brought by this movement.

It is very important that this chapter comprises different geographical areas and societal understandings and thus offers a rare chance to catch a glimpse of the times through the lens of the artists the author describes and provides images to emphasize the qualities and novelties.

Of great interest is the part dedicated to the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century illustration. With insightful commentaries on the selected illustrators, the author describes some of the goals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century illustration and also the technical means used as a result of new printing technologies and large-scale availability. With highlights on important practitioners, an approach that's doesn't aim to be inclusive but more of an exquisite preamble to the diversity of a rapid-changing century, the author presents how and why, with the beginning of a new epoch, the children book illustration became a tool for political propaganda on the changes that, one party accused the other to be responsible with. From these attempts, we are subsequently carried to the emergence of "fantasy" type of illustration and a new type of understanding the relation between text and image through a new type of narrative. This can be seen in the cases of contemporary illustrators analyzed, such as Rébecca Dautremer, Benhamin Lacombe, Vladyslav Yerko, Gennady Spirin and Shaun Taun, among others. The changes, the nowadays interest on a particular type of imagery, the public and the expectancies are thus presented and bring one closer to the directions existing in book illustration to this day.

The second chapter of the book is dedicated to the Romanian book illustration. We are introduced to the manuscripts of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the development of printing techniques, following the history of the influences that shaped the illustration during the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The author presents the animated society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and how the writings, translated or local, were accompanied by drawings to emphasis the message. Through the applied focus on the Romanian creators, such as Val Munteanu, Ligia Macovei, Marcela Cordescu, Silviu Băiaș, Livia Rusz, Vasile Socoliuc,

Vasile Kazar, Mircea Dumitrescu and many others, one can see how the children book illustration became an art *per se*, artists becoming not only creators of beautiful, narrative images, but creators of a new understanding of text through image.

The conclusion reinforces what every chapter and subchapter stated, the fact that, regardless times, illustration serves as a barometer of trends in art and society. Even if now, with countless interests, many styles in the art stage, book illustration varies according to culture, history, even politics, through the examples provided in this book, the author successfully draws the existing directions and opens up the curiosity in each reader, to find out more about where it is heading.

*Short History of Book Illustration* is a necessary reading, for bringing not only quality and well-documented information, but for the pleasure of walking through history, together with more or less known illustrators, who shaped our vision on understanding the image and continue to build the imagery of many generations to come.