

Exhibit: Sendak's work much more than child's play - Morning Call, The (Allentown, PA) - May 25, 2008 - page E1

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There's a wild rumpus going on at the Rosenbach Museum & Library in Philadelphia. The classy institution, once the home of rare book dealers, is known for high-brow artifacts by Herman Melville, William Blake and James Joyce. But taking center stage for the next year is a man who built his reputation drawing pictures of monsters for children.

"There's a Mystery There: Sendak on Sendak" is an impressive and expansive look at the work of Maurice Sendak, the author and illustrator responsible for changing the course of children's literature with the 1963 classic "Where the Wild Things Are."

Sendak's work is much more than child's play, says consulting curator Patrick Rodgers.

"The more widely I read Sendak, the more I realized he's not just a children's book illustrator," Rodgers says. "We wanted to show how he layers his stories with things for children and things for adults in the same book."

The works on display illustrate the multifaceted nature of Sendak's work. "I was looking for images, sketches, doodles and working materials that show how Sendak layers his story," Rodgers says. "That's what the exhibit is essentially concerned with. When Sendak approaches a work to illustrate, he doesn't want just to echo the text. The illustration has to add something -- what he's referred to as "the other story."

The "other story" in Sendak's work is sometimes dark. He has often drawn the simple terror found in the minds of children and has illustrated works that deal with the Holocaust. He has been both blamed and praised for changing the course of children's literature by ending the era of innocent books about idealized childhood.

Rodgers believes that even those who have never read Sendak feel his influence. Sendak taught many illustrators directly and influenced countless others. "Even if you don't know Sendak, you or somebody you know have been touched by books that have been touched by his influences," he says.

The Rosenbach has a long history with Sendak, beginning in 1966. Clive Driver, then director of the Rosenbach, met Sendak at an event at the Philadelphia Free Library. Driver described the Rosenbach's collection of Blake and Melville, and Sendak immediately became highly interested. Sendak had long been a fan of these writers and was also excited to learn that the Rosenbach also held work by artists John Tenniel, original illustrator of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," and George Cruikshank, illustrator of many Charles Dickens' works, including "Oliver Twist."

Sendak began donating his papers to the Rosenbach in the early 1970s. In a 2007 interview, Sendak explained that he chose the little museum instead of a large university because he wanted people to be able to see the works.

The Rosenbach now has the biggest collection of "Sendakiana" in the world. And thanks to this exhibition, people can not only see his pictures but are also given access to rare pieces of ephemera. Alongside original color artwork from "Where the Wild Things Are," "In The Night Kitchen," "The Nutshell Library," "Outside Over There" and "Brundibar" are "dummy" books with early sketches for "The Sign on Rosie's Door," "Pierre" and "Higglety, Pigglety, Pop!"

The most striking are likely to be the original art from "Where the Wild Things Are." The iconic monsters have been reproduced thousands of times on T-shirts, bags, even in commercials, but the chance to see the original watercolor in a museum setting is to remember how striking the art is. Rodgers explains Sendak's singular style.

"They are long format watercolor painting," he says. "What makes them unique is that 'Where the Wild Things Are' was the first book that Sendak did that blended watercolor style with this black-and-white, pen-and-ink style that he was developing. The art is brilliant -- dazzling watercolors that pop brightly and are vibrant, but his cross-hatching has all this darkness. It's a nuanced style. And the subject matter! To see the beasts: those creatures are captivating. They've captivated people for decades."

Of course, there is also "the other story" behind the famous book. It's more than about monsters or imagination. Rogers says "Where the Wild Things Are" is ultimately a book about family -- not just Max's family, but Sendak's family.

"The wild things are themselves exaggerated portraits of Sendak's family," he says. "There's an undercurrent there of family memories that he's trying to explore."

The exhibit includes pieces that were never published. Sendak attempted to illustrate J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Hobbit," but never completed the project. The drawings, however, are on display. There are also works in various states of completion -- covers that changed, drawings with eraser marks, and even manuscripts with notes like "This is the worst!"

And serving as guide, by videoscreen anyway, is Sendak himself. "We wanted the exhibition to be as story-based as possible," Rogers says. "We want you to carry a story through with you. And the best person to do that is Maurice himself."

Video touch-screens allow visitors to dial up interviews -- all new material created specifically for this exhibit -- of Sendak discussing his feelings, his artistic process, and his influences. He also just tells stories.

"Sendak is a magnificent storyteller," Rodgers says. "He's spell-binding. He's funny. He's down-to-earth, but at the same time he's referencing art and history and literature from the ages. There are so many sides to him."

In one amusing clip discussing William Blake, Sendak describes the 19th-century British poet as "a flaming maniac," adding that is "the best compliment" he could give an artist. Visitors to the Rosenbach will see that Maurice Sendak was a flaming maniac as well -- in the best possible way.

Josh Berk is a freelance writer.

Jodi Duckett,

Assistant Entertainment Editor

jodi.duckett@mcall.com

610-820-6704

THE DETAILS

"THERE'S A MYSTERY THERE:

SENDAK ON SENDAK'

What: Major retrospective exhibition of artist/author Maurice Sendak, including original color artwork from books such as "Where the Wild Things Are," "In the Night Kitchen," "The Nutshell Library," "Outside Over There" and

"Brundibar."

When: Through May 3, 2009.

Where: Rosenbach Museum, 2008-2010 Delancey Place, Philadelphia.

Special events: Sendak's 80th birthday bash, 5:30-7:30 p.m. June 10. Gallery talk, "Out and About Sendak," Bill Adair, Hirsig family director of education, discusses how Sendak's life as a gay man played out in his books, 6 p.m. June 25. Gallery Talk, "It's a Dog's Life: From Sealyham to Shepherd," Judith Gaston, Rosenbach curator and director of collections, talks about Sendak's kinship with dogs, 6 p.m. July 16.

Info: www.rosenbach.org or call 215-732-1600.

CITATION (AGLC STYLE)

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