

MARY BLAIR

End of the Day, ca. 1930
watercolor on paper, 23 1/2 x 28 1/4 in



courtesy: The Estate of Mary Blair and CaliforniaWatercolor.com

saying it was Caroline's favorite book. Her children were showcased in appearances populating that unforgettable Disney display designed by Blair, "it's a small world" (Disney styled the name in all lowercase). It could as easily have been called "it's a Mary Blair world," so indicative is it of the dynamism of her design. "It's a small world" began as a ride at the 1964 World's Fair in New York, where boats took passengers, fifteen at a time, on a "world cruise" through Blair-designed international stage sets. Later, the ride was moved to Disneyland, and was replicated in other Disney parks in Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Paris.

Also sparking recognition in the over-fifty crowd are the many examples of Blair's commercial designs, such as the blonde pixie dressed in denim coveralls and wooden shoes who was the icon for Dutch Boy paints. Similarly, though maybe more insidious from our current perspective (but perhaps forgivable for a chain-smoking artist), there's the series of advertisements for Pall Mall that associated the company's cigarettes, in energetic Picasso-esque collage compositions, with refreshing natural and "healthy" tastes such as watermelon, lemon, and pear.

Not all of Blair's works were for Disney's youthful audience or for commercial advertising. In Blair's stunning early watercolors from the 1930s, such as her *Okie Camp* of 1933, she imparted the shadowy despair of a Depression-era migrant workers' camp as deftly as a story by John Steinbeck or a photograph by Dorothea Lange. A little boy plays with a broken wagon on a dirt path, a father hangs tattered laundry on a line, and ramshackle homes made of scavenged materials create a sorry skyline of desolation and poverty. Everything teeters at a tired angle, jury-rigged and signaling dilapidation—even the telegraph pole in the background which, transfigured, becomes a lonely cue for one's Christian sympathies.

If you saw last year's David Hockney exhibit at the de Young Museum in San Francisco, you could have noticed some haunting similarities to Blair's work. Like Hockney, Blair often used large blocks of bold, solid color—a strategy that sometimes gives an impression similar to that of Matisse's cutouts of the 1940s, or to the works of Raoul Dufy (1877–1953), who was active from the 1930s through the 1950s, Blair's formative years. In many of Blair's happier designs there's a real joy of life told in brilliant color, something I also love in Dufy's works. Another way of look-

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ing at Blair's bright colors is that, mid-century, they were competing for attention in a highly colorized environment of emerging pop art and other abstracting movements that emphasized color for visual impact. Blair borrowed freely from the modernist trends of her time, as had painters such as Phil Dike and George Post, artists she had worked with earlier in her career when she was part of the influential California Water Color Society.

Blair was also attentive to folk art from various cultures. Along with cubism, expressionism, and even surrealism, there are hints of Navajo blankets, African kente cloth, and Peruvian textiles woven throughout her designs. In a study Blair did for "it's a small world," children of New Guinea play below a backdrop of tall shields vibrant with indigenous-inspired designs. You can get a powerful sense of this if you've ever been to Disney's Contemporary Resort at Walt Disney World in Florida, in the hotel's Grand Canyon Concourse. There, you can see Blair at her most