

MARY BLAIR

Peruvian Boy, ca. 1941
watercolor on paper, 10 1/4 x 7 2/3 in



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monumental and breathtaking—in the ninety-foot-high mosaic in the hotel foyer, depicting Native American children in a fabulously patterned landscape in oranges, that cascades down the towering wall like a patchwork woven-textile waterfall.

Blair admired the American quilting tradition and the dynamism of its patchwork designs, and this aesthetic, too, finds its way into her art. She loved the medium of glazed tile for mural mosaics, as the shiny surfaces gave a watery feel to the works. The Contemporary Resort mural reminds me of the flowing abstract clothing and backgrounds of Gustav Klimt, in such works as *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I* (1907) and *The Kiss* (1908). In another instance, as John Canemaker notes, a study of an urban skyline busy with construction projects, painted by Blair for the short film *The Little House* (1952), seems to have borrowed from Piet Mondrian, especially his *The City* (1919); Fernand Léger also comes to mind. The whole wide world of art was Mary Blair's playground, and she was an extraordinary synthesizer of styles. Her visual memory must have been astonishing.

Blair's sense of the potentialities of exotic locales and other cultures as sources for design and color may have been inspired by a trip she and her husband took with Walt and Lillian Disney to South America in 1941. Visiting seven countries over three months, Blair worked every day, producing a staggering number of paintings. The rhythms of the samba, the palette of the Latin landscape, the vivid tapestries of local costumes, and the opulent diversity of the vernacular culture must have inspired her. This trip was followed by others in later years as well—to Mexico in 1942 and Cuba in 1943. Her voluminous sketches and studies from these years contributed to two Disney classics: *Saludos Amigos* (1943) and *The Three Caballeros* (1945). Her Latin themes were so admired that two murals were commissioned for the Beverly Hills home of that era's most popular Latin star, Carmen Miranda—who was also the poster girl for Teddy Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy, just as the Disney films echoed of the government's official friendship towards Latin America. Carmen's sister, Aurora Miranda, had starred in Disney's *The Three Caballeros*, to which Blair had contributed both set and costume designs.

This sensitivity to myriad cultures and their worlds enabled Blair to create exhibits that spoke of a universal

human aesthetic. And while her designs implied an inclusive internationalism—very much in keeping with the Disney philosophy—it was color that struck an even more fundamental human chord, since, like music, color crosses cultural boundaries in its universal appeal. With her Disney projects, Blair was addressing a worldwide audience, emphasizing commonality even as the Cold War was casting its threat of nuclear destruction. Blair's most lasting legacy is an art of unadulterated joy, a celebration of style and form that unifies all people in an aesthetic experience.

It seems such an old-fashioned idea now; naive, even: beauty as a universal and unifying component of the human experience. Yet, one wonders: if art can't, at least occasionally, offer this to contemporary societies, then its mandate has truly run its course. The "it's a small world" theme ride, which made its first appearance in 1964 as a display for UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), is sometimes derided as naive and cloyingly cheery, but it appeared on the world's stage at a tough time for America. John F. Kennedy had been assassinated only months before, and America's involvement in Vietnam was increasing. It generated an attitude of hope in a time that was increasingly disheartening for Americans. It encouraged people to envision a better world.

Blair knew how color could play out in different media: films, set decoration, magazine pages, murals. She realized that animated films were a luminous medium, made of light. She is said to have considered white the most festive color; but I think she was often most effective at the other end of the spectrum. Stories such as *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, based on European fables, juxtaposed virtue with terrifying evil. Blair knew how black could impart a sense of dread, and how it could make other colors pop out and make white radiant in contrast.

In a paint study for *Cinderella*, the heroine appears backlit and silhouetted in a doorway to a shadowy room, reminiscent of a still from a film noir classic, complete with a "Dutch tilt"—the point of view is slightly canted to strengthen the sense of unease. Cinderella's tiny figure is surrounded by a darkness shaded with the menace of ominous spiderwebs, as if she is a small and lonely beacon in a world of evil. The webs in the foreground, with Cinderella in the background, impart a dramatic tunnel effect of deep space. The light that creeps into the room around her