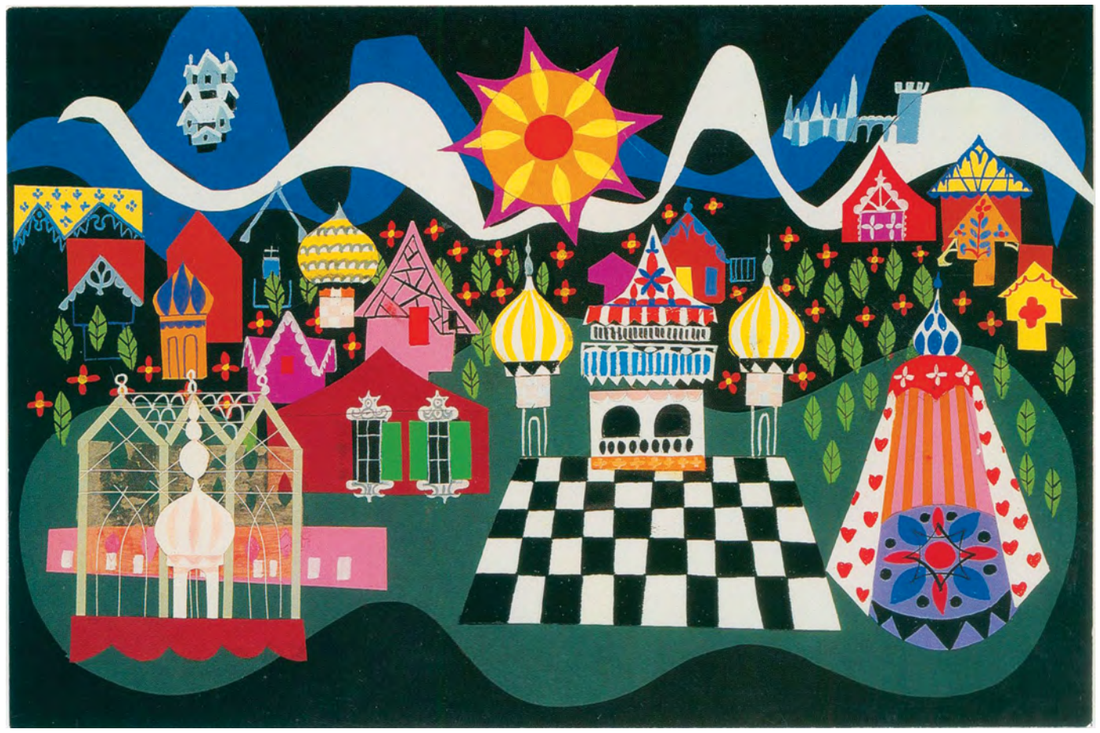
MARY BLAIR

Preliminary design collage,
It's a Small World, 1964.
postcard, 4 x 6 in



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ALLAN LANGDALE

The Not-So-Small World of Mary Blair

Female Animator in a World of Mice and Men

Mary Blair reviews concept drawings for *Cinderella*.

There's a black-and-white photograph, taken in the mid-1960s, of a group of people who were the principal animators for Walt Disney at the height of the expansion of Disney World. At the center of the otherwise-all-male team is a diminutive blonde woman in a confident pose: Mary Blair, one of Disney's most prolific and talented illustrators. Blair received her training in the early 1930s at the prestigious Chouinard School of Art in Los Angeles, under the tutelage of artists such as Pruett Carter, who was an illustrator for *McCall's*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, and other popular magazines. She was the wife of another accomplished Disney animator, Lee Blair, who eventually left Disney to start his own design and marketing company, to which Mary contributed in later years. Long before it was fashionable to do so, Mary Blair juggled a high-pressure career while raising two children. She produced a huge body of work in myriad techniques: collage, watercolor, gouache, mosaic, oil, and even ceramic tile murals. Her output was so impressive and her legacy so durable that in 2011 she was accorded a decidedly contemporary kind of honor: Google designed a masthead—a "Google Doodle"—in Mary Blair style, celebrating her 100th birthday.

When you look at her work, there's something preternaturally familiar about it. For those of an older generation, there are the memories of backgrounds, settings, and costumes in the Disney classics of the Golden Years: *Song of the South* (1946), *Cinderella* (1950), *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), and *Peter Pan* (1953). But younger people might perceive these films as forerunners of the super-cute world of *manga* and *anime* Japanese comic illustration, whose huge-eyed figures owe much to Blair. Japanese animation artists, such as Osamu Tezuka, the "Godfather of Anime," were impacted by Disney classics such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Bambi*—Tezuka did a Japanese *anime* version of the latter. These and other Disney works, including those produced by Blair, were disseminated worldwide by Animated Disney Films.

Versions of Blair's children with circular heads, also intoxicatingly cute (though she may have gone overboard with the giant-headed tots of *Baby Ballet* in 1941), found their way into five Golden Books children's stories in the 1950s and 1960s. One, Ruth Krauss's *I Can Fly*, is still in print. In 1960, Jacqueline Kennedy sent a letter to Blair

MARY BLAIR

End of the Day, ca. 1930
watercolor on paper, 23 ½ x 28 ¼ 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 looking 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.

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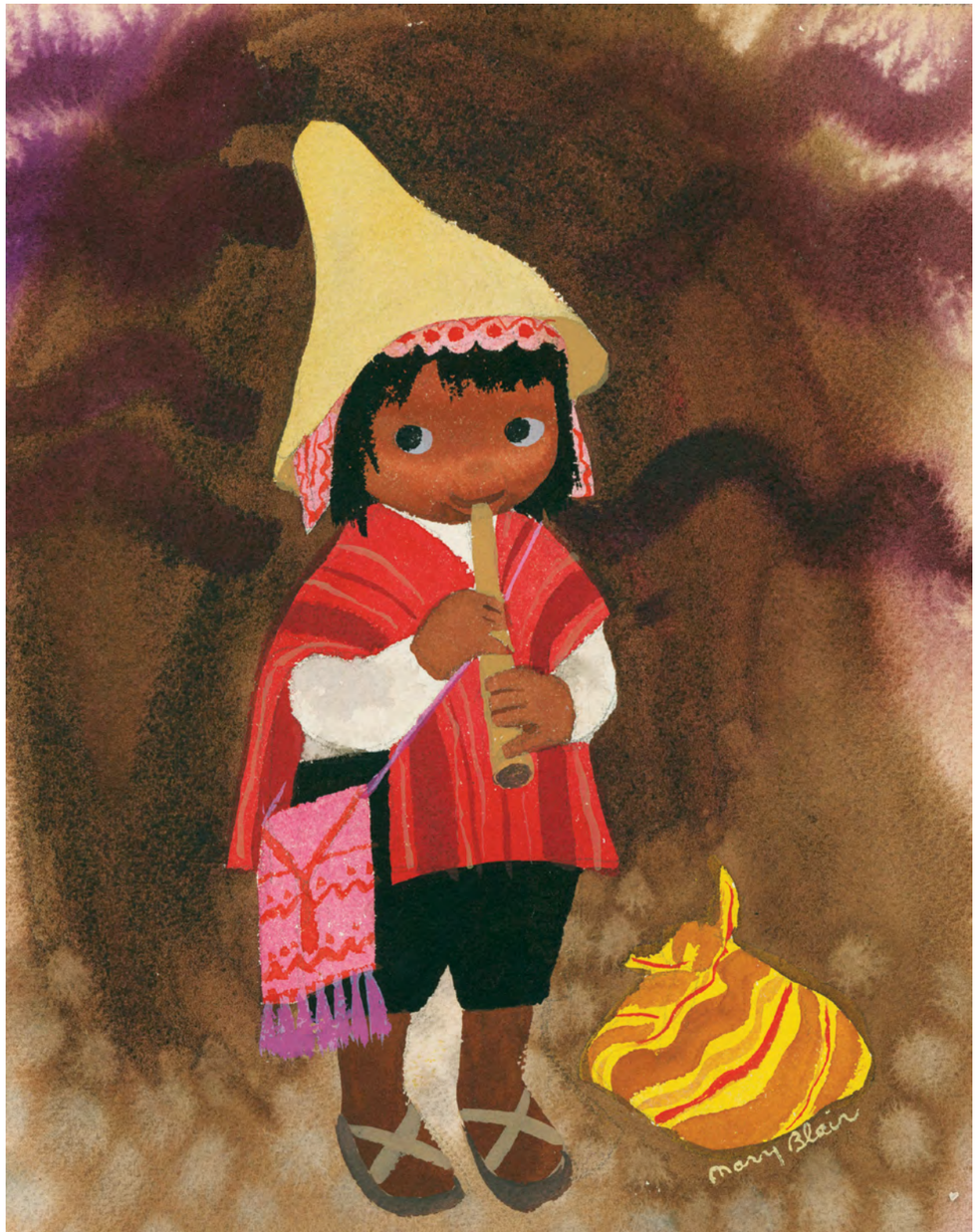
Blair was also attentive to folk art from various cultures. Along with cubism, expressionism, and even surrealism, there are hints of Navajo blankets, African kente cloth, and Peruvian textiles woven throughout her designs. In a study Blair did for "it's a small world," children of New Guinea play below 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

MARY BLAIR

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



courtesy: of Walt Disney Family Foundation copyright Disney Company

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.

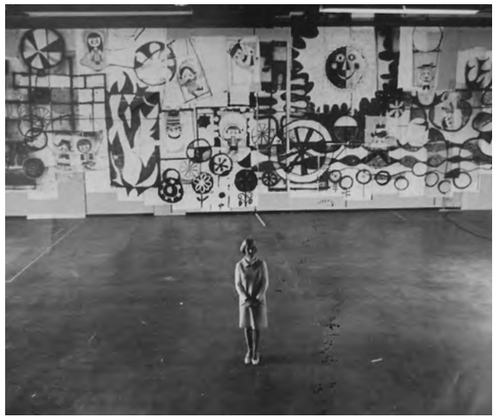
In a paint study for *Cinderella*, the heroine appears backlit and silhouetted in a doorway to a shadowy room, reminiscent of a still from a film noir classic, complete with a "Dutch tilt"— the point of view is slightly canted to strengthen the sense of unease. Cinderella's tiny figure is surrounded 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

body rakes across ancient cobblestones, creating dramatic perspectival lines. It's pretty scary, and these are things kids respond to strongly—and adults, too, if we're honest with ourselves.

A similar film-noir-like composition is a study that shows Cinderella illuminated on a rickety Escher-esque staircase that could have been imported from a German expressionist film of the 1920s. It makes me think of the staircase of the mission bell tower in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). Blair used lighter colors and tints at the bottom of the staircase, lighting the shot like a cinematographer and thus emphasizing the deep perspective. The stairs are so effectively used as compositional devices, Sergei Eisenstein would have been impressed. At Cinderella's feet lie the glass slippers, radiant glints of white, casting shadows in a raking light.

In a study for *Peter Pan*, Blair painted a dark, cloudy sky through which a brilliant moon beams a yellow shaft of light that Peter Pan, Wendy, and her brothers ride upon. The silhouettes of Peter and the children are jagged zigzags, like little black fragments of lightning, to give an impression of their speed. The radiance of the soft moonlight is picked up on the clouds that drift about in luminescent layers.

Much of Blair's work has been lost. Other work is to be found only in private collections. Yet there are some that are merely hidden. Blair created large murals for Tomorrowland, and they still survive at Disneyland—completely hidden by later walls. I'd love to be around when they're revealed again. John Canemaker ends his book on Blair with a quote from Pete Docter, the director of Pixar's *Monsters, Inc.* (2001), saying that at some point in every production the animators say, "Let's look at Mary Blair stuff!" Mary Blair's legacy survives. Her not-so-small world is still expanding.



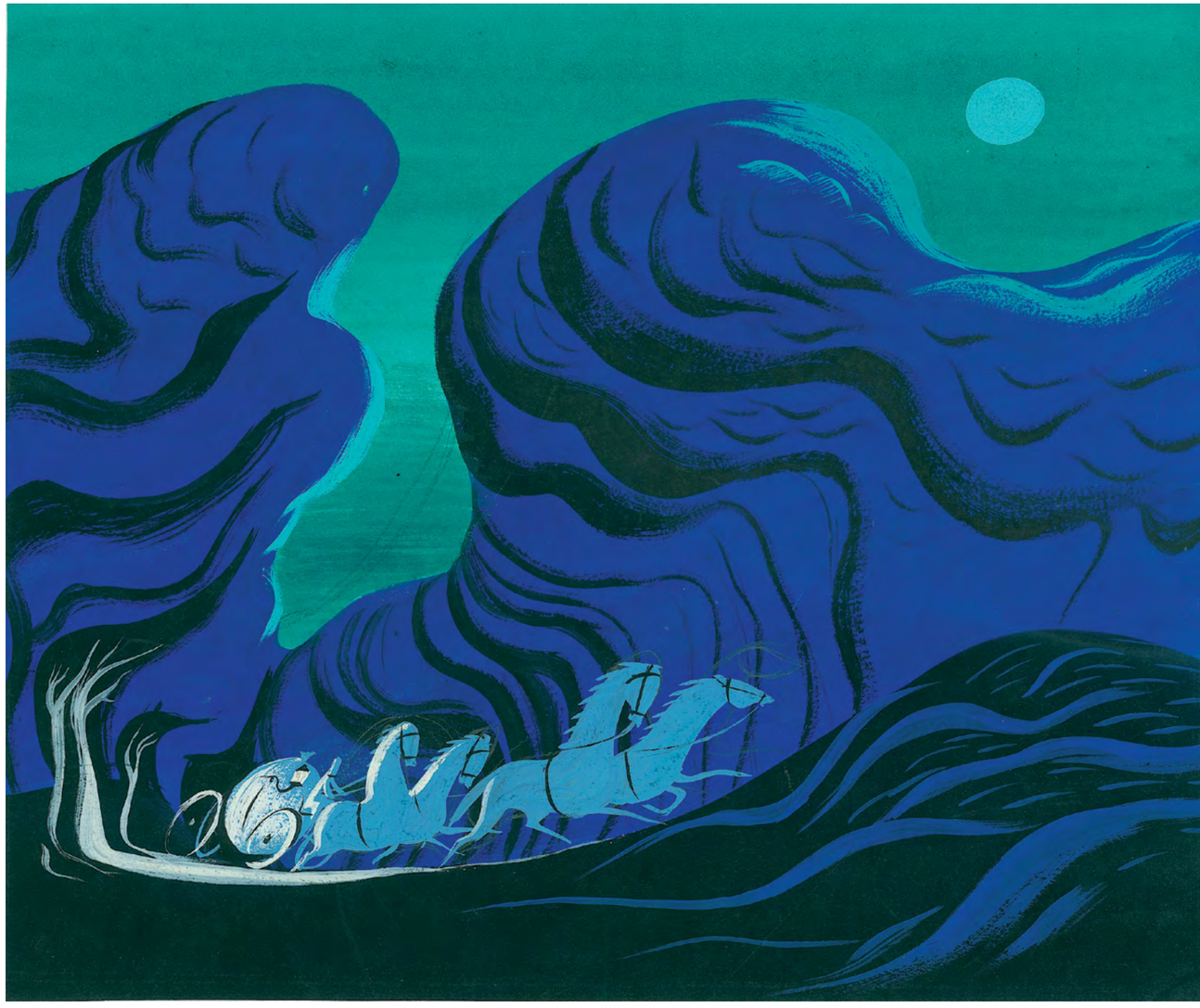
Mary Blair in front of her mural design for Tomorrowland, Disneyland, ca. 1967.

Born Mary Browne Robinson in 1911 in McAlester, Oklahoma, **Mary Blair** spent the last years of her life in Soquel, California. Her life's work is on display in the exhibition *Magic, Color, Flair: the World of Mary Blair* at the Walt Disney Family Museum in San Francisco, March 13 to September 7, 2014. The show is curated by the accomplished animator and scholar John Canemaker, author of the definitive book on Blair, *The Art and Flair of May Blair* (New York: Disney Editions, 2003). I am indebted to Canemaker's volume for information in this essay. (See also Michael Gormley, "Mary Blair: Painting in Hollywood," in *American Artist*, vol. 76, Issue 827 (March/April 2012), pp. 30–34, and *The Colors of Mary Blair*, exhibition catalogue of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, in Japanese and English, 2009.) Canemaker is producing a lavishly illustrated 172-page catalogue for the *Magic, Color, Flair* exhibition.

Allan Langdale is a freelance scholar, travel writer and photographer, and documentary filmmaker who teaches part-time at the University of California in both Santa Cruz and Santa Barbara. An art historian specializing in architecture, he has taught courses in many aspects of world art and architecture. He is the author of several articles as well as the definitive guidebook to the archeology and historical architecture of northern Cyprus. He also directed and produced the award-winning documentary film *The Stones of Famagusta: the Story of a Forgotten City*, which tells the remarkable story of one of the Mediterranean's most famous cities.

MARY BLAIR

Visual development, *Cinderella,* 1950
opaque watercolor on paper, 8 1/2 x 10 1/4 in



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