

Jerry Pinkney's Creative Process

Pinkney wanted to be a storyteller through his pictures. He aimed to make illustrations to parallel the text, not mimic it, adding his own pictorial story lines. The following is a summary of his process to beautifully accomplish that.

Receive a written manuscript

Jerry Pinkney would first carefully, slowly read the text, letting it speak to him. He sometimes worked closely with the writer to flesh out the book and images. Sometimes that author was his wife, Gloria Jean, a children's book author. He wanted to illustrate the story as he saw it. In his own words:

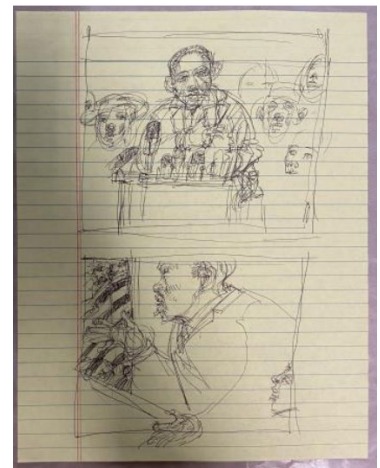
"I am a storyteller at heart. Is this story worth telling? Is the manuscript an interesting read?... Will I, in the process of making the pictures, learn something new? I let the text speak to me."

He was drawn to books where children or animals played central roles, and to books about the African American experience. He strove to interpret their difficult subjects positively, displaying their "tragedy, resilience, courage, and grit". He said, "Through such books, I could make a contribution to society."

Thumbnail sketches

He drew extensive sketches on available paper – lined legal notepad in our exhibit. We'll see some of these for his book "A Place to Land".

2 panels: MLK at lectern, top; profile of MLK with flag at bottom, from exhibit



Research, more research... and still more research

Part of what makes Pinkney's work so remarkable is the care he took to make images historically accurate. He did meticulous research into the clothing, furniture, buildings, and settings of each story. He utilized the NY Public Library Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, friends at the National Parks Service, and traveled to different parts of the country and different historic sites. Throughout, there was a sense of discovery for himself, particularly as he learned more about historic Black culture. His relationship with the author Julius Lester,

with whom he illustrated 9 books, helped him understand the impact of growing up in the South versus his experiences growing up in Philadelphia. Over the years, Pinkney compiled an extensive collection of vintage photos that he referred to in his art making.

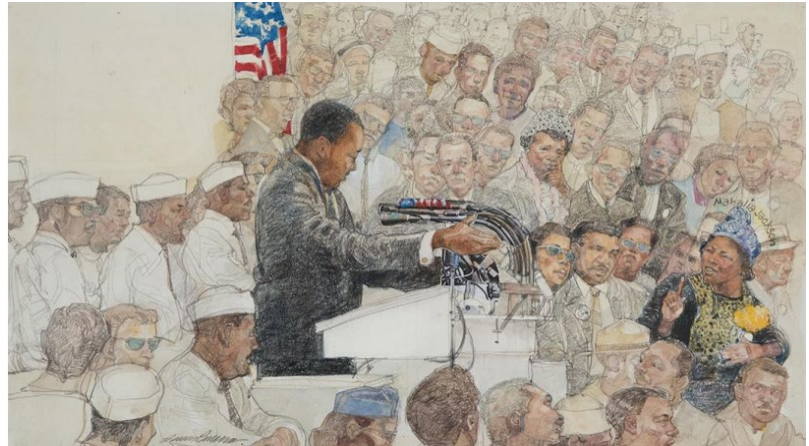
“Tell them about the dream, Martin!” from exhibition

Models



In this Aug. 28, 1963 photo, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, gestures during his "I Have a Dream" speech as he addresses thousands of civil rights supporters gathered in Washington, D.C. (AP Photo)

Pinkney had people model for him, wearing clothes similar to the vintage garb he'd researched and assuming stances he wanted to incorporate in the book. Then he would take photographs of them in order to refer back. These people were sometimes new to him, sometimes friends, or family, or he may be the model himself. His children have been portrayed in his books.



Larger, developmental drawings, working drawings, and “Dummy” books

Pinkney now began to flesh out the illustrations for the book, exploring possible interpretations, drawing how he saw the story unfold. In our exhibit, we have drawings for A Place to Land and The Little Mermaid. A dummy book is a mock up of the final, including placement of the manuscript on the page.

Include “Melody A working drawing”
From The Little Mermaid, in exhibition

Final Illustrations



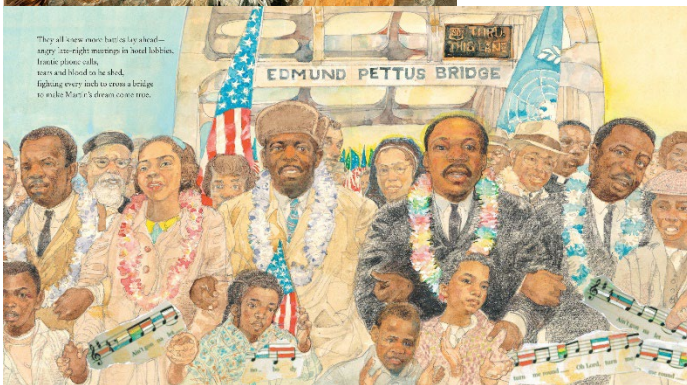
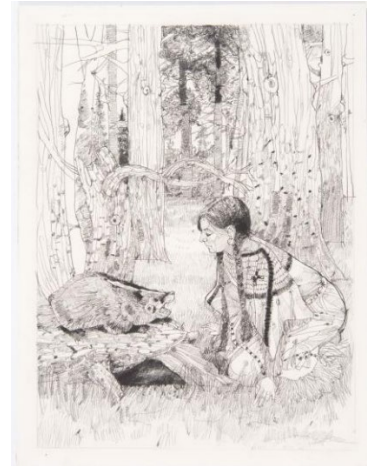
Pinkney drew the entire book illustration in pencil, his first passion. Early in his career, illustrations were completed as black and white drawings, as color in children's books was considered too expensive. This changed to full color in the 1980s.

Include "She Prayed Badger to do her one favor" from Tonweya and the Eagles in exhibition

To add that color, he layered watercolor paints on top of the drawings, leaving most of the pencil lines still visible. He took particularly care with the visible wood grains, an homage to his woodworking father. He liked the fresh, translucent quality of watercolors that allows the viewer to "step inside" the image.



A picture from "The Lion and the Mouse," a version of Aesop's fable. Caldecott Prize Winner, Not in exhibition



In A Place to Land, Pinkney also included collage to further enhance the story. Other mediums he sometimes used were pastels, colored pencils, and Cray-Pas, an oil-based crayon.

They all knew more battles lay ahead (Pettus Bridge Crossing), 2019 in exhibit

It would take Pinkney six months to finish a book in this manner. At the time of his death in 2021, he had illustrated over 100 books, including picture books, non-fiction titles and novels.

The Room Where It Happened

Pinkney remembered creating his first portfolio in the bathroom of the small one-room apartment he shared with his wife and new baby, sitting on the commode and leaning over the bathtub. After moving up to Croton-on-Hudson, NY, in 1970 he created a studio in the lower level of his house.





Photo by Jesse Bourdon, 2008

Pinkney's final studio was a rented space, in a large, sunlit room that a neighbor specially created for him over their garage in 2010. It was 125 steps from his own home. The large space meant he no longer needed to move materials around and he said that he was his most productive there.

It had two drawing tables – one for drawing, one for painting, and two work tables that gave him enough space to lay out entire books. Walls are covered with artwork, shelves are full of books and objects he had used in his books, and there are plants throughout the space. There is also a reading area and library for clients, visitors, and “museum folk.” Pinkney started working early, listening to music and, in the winter, lighting a wood burning stove. He enjoyed watching the animals outside the windows, the change of seasons and the lengthening of the day.

<http://www.jerrypinkneystudio.com/frameset.html>