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148 The Louvre of children's art

At Oslo's unique museum, youngsters eagerly view the creations of their peers, with adults happily in tow
By Israel Shenker, photographs by Julian Nieman



Outstanding for its color and brilliant distortion, *Myself* is by 7-year-old Bilgundi Gurydatta Mallinath.

By Israel Shenker

Winsome, weird and wonderful— art made by children

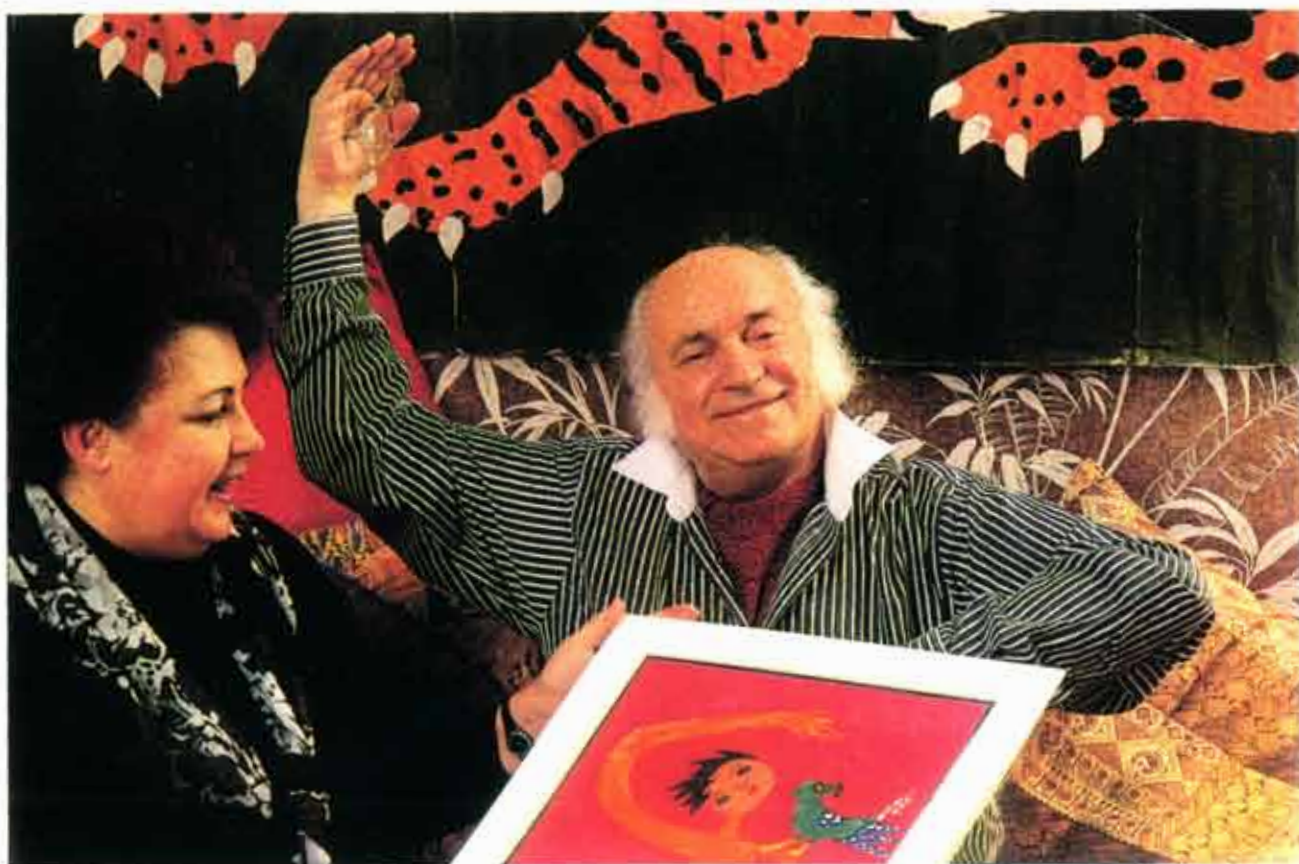
In Oslo, the only museum of its kind in the world is devoted solely to promoting the seemingly infinite creativeness of the young

This museum has nothing in a glass case, nothing remote or sheltered from touch. In Oslo's International Museum of Children's Art, what a feast of imagination and feeling and color! The walls of blue or green or burgundy or even white are all but covered with art, from infant's eye level to topside giant's perspective. One large wall is crammed with animal paintings. A yellow-green mouse with big black spots is eating green cheese—the work of a 13-year-old Argentinian boy. A 9-year-old Indian youngster has daubed his painted elephant with red and green.

"Our ambition here is to be the Louvre of children's art," says Rafael Goldin, the museum director whose adult dream has taken childhood's shape. "Children see that a museum can mean joy and color. If their first visit is to a boring, dusty museum, children will always associate museums with dusty and boring."

This small-scale Louvre positively kindles joy, even euphoria, thanks to a collection of about 100,000 works from some 150 countries. There are even two paintings by 17-year-old Albanian boys—the gift of Albania's envoy to Stockholm, who sent the works along with brandy (not exhibited).

Muiz Chaudry, a 10-year-old Pakistani boy who lives in Norway, painted a tree series: women's figures with arms as branches and blooms, man-tree and woman-tree stretching limbs toward each other, heads of mother and father on trees with leaf bearing large child's head. A 12-year-old girl painted *Skilsmisse* (Divorce): mother and father at opposite sides, each



Alla and Rafael Goldin are surrounded by children's art at home. Rafael, a Russian filmmaker who went on

to Norway, became interested in art made by children while doing film of children's views of their fathers.

pulling at an arm of the child, who is about to be torn apart. Other family scenes reflect changes in society: while one Norwegian girl, age 12, drew *Mother Always Has to Stay at Home While Dad's at Work*, another, two years her junior, executed *Mother Works in a Sausage Factory to Earn the Same Money as Dad*. One huge painting was done with paint sprayed by finger from a toothbrush. A 7-year-old boy depicted Jesus waving from his wooden cradle, with large, round baby face.

One room is crammed with dolls and other figures, many of them made by children—wooden dolls, knitted dolls, crocheted dolls, ceramic dolls, rag dolls, fiber dolls, painted dolls, sailing dolls, dancing dolls, happy dolls, exhausted dolls, even warrior dolls. In addition: furry animals, smooth animals, inquisitive animals, contented animals, prowling animals, sacred animals. Tiny trapeze artists hang upside down. Dragons and trolls abound.

Above an arch between two rooms, 15 feet from end to end, is a work titled *From morning to evening*. People and animals go about their work from predawn at the right to darkness at the left—the masterpiece of a 14-year-old Indian boy.

On a black background, a young Turk has painted a large human figure and, instead of placing it within a landscape, has enclosed the landscape within the figure. Here are trees and houses and apartment buildings, mosque with minarets, railroad line, bridge, reservoir, farmer's tractor. All life is within the person, and everything beyond is darkness.

One section is labeled "*Ved livets kilde*" ("The source of life"). Three Argentinian teenagers collaborated on a large portrait of a woman divided by three broad lines across her body, symbolizing forces seeking to destroy nature. "Ninety percent of the works show the beauties of nature, and only 10 percent show crisis and problems," says Goldin. "Children are used to seeing and creating the positive side—flowers, plants, trees, sky, heaven. We should focus more on what children do, because when we become adults we spend so much energy trying to recapture childhood. If we preserve the quality of the child this will help us through the hardest strokes life can give. If we have the child's faith, even the impossible is possible."

Rafael Goldin was born in Kiev 70 years ago and was brought up in Moscow. When he was about 12, his

*Photographs by Julian Nieman/
Susan Griggs Agency*



Deeply absorbed, a group of schoolchildren visiting museum are drawn into discussion by director Goldin.

Some pictures hang at tots' eye level. Says Goldin: "The first meeting with exhibited art is crucial."



father deserted the family. "I spent many years compensating for what I didn't get from my father in those years—to feel secure and whole. Family is not society's invention—it's primarily biological."

Young Rafael tried to express his feelings through drawing, but had so little talent that he cried in frustration. He decided to create art in film and gained a prized admission to the State Institute of Film Education, studying under masters such as Eisenstein. During World War II he completed his training by serving at the front as a one-man film unit. Then, over the course of several years, he directed about 50 documentaries as well as 4 feature films.

In 1973, thanks to the Soviet government's desire to improve its image, a sudden exodus of Jews was permitted. Among them was Goldin—who left with his wife and 7-year-old son. "For once there was an advantage to being Jewish," Goldin says.

His wife had a married sister in Norway, so the Goldins went there. Four months later he and his wife separated, then divorced. His wife got custody of the son. "I couldn't speak a word of Norwegian," Goldin recalls. "I had lost my country, culture, language, wife and son. And I was alone. It was the worst crisis I had ever experienced. But I had managed to leave the Soviet Union, I had escaped from a gigantic prison. Why should I let my life be destroyed? I grabbed a Norwegian-Russian dictionary and began to study. I

threw myself into this study as I had for each new film into a new subject. Short but intense. The essential question was, 'To be or not to be.'

"After two months I could speak about film plans with film people in Norway. When people helped me by writing letters applying for money, they'd always write 'In a very short time he achieved a fantastic ability in Norwegian.' Eight months after arriving I began shooting a film. Under Norwegian circumstances, that's incredible speed."

The first film was about a Russian émigré poet. In 1977, for his next film, Goldin wanted to portray children's views of father. For two years he had struggled unsuccessfully to win access to his son, and as a result of this the subject obsessed him. He began traveling to schools all over Norway, having won the cooperation of Ase Gruda Skard, an eminent child psychologist. "When I used her name, all doors opened. 'I need your help' were often my first words to the children. 'Because I want to make a film about the relations between father and child. I don't think grown-ups know what you think. I want to make the film with you. We adults make films for children. This time, children are making a film for adults.'"

Israel Shenker writes on a multitude of topics from his home near Glasgow, Scotland. In September 1990 he wrote for SMITHSONIAN on Agatha Christie.

Those with artistic talent worked seriously, with concentration. For them it was not a game. "I was overwhelmed by the responses of the children. Some cried as they painted. Some expressed anger and frustration. Some just sat quietly for a long time, thinking intensely. I also observed their happiness when they succeeded in expressing what they felt." A 3-year-old painted *My Father is Angry*. Another boy drew a large figure of white outline and a small figure just below. The large figure was cut off at the top of the head. "Like Eisenstein taught," notes Goldin. "If you portray a figure cut off at the top of the head, it concentrates attention on the eyes."

Planning a book as well as a film, he kept the artwork, and within two years he had a trove of children's art. He also collected a wife, Alla, an émigré Russian physician he met in Germany, and her son and daughter. She passed the exams allowing her to practice in Norway and began working for local hospitals.

In 1979 King Olav V opened an exhibition of the children's art in Bergen. Goldin wanted to exhibit children's art at Oslo's National Gallery. "The director wouldn't talk to us. He laughed at us. I was told afterwards that to be recognized you must first earn a reputation abroad."

The next year the art was exhibited in Vienna, then in other foreign cities. It went to the United Nations in New York. In Paris the exhibition at UNESCO was opened by explorer-adventurer Thor Heyerdahl. He was pleased to hear that while he worked on the childhood of civilization, this was the civilization of childhood. In 1983 children's art was shown at Oslo's Henie-Onstad Art Center and drew 45,000 visitors. "More than for Picasso," says Goldin, smiling mischievously.

"Paintings on the beds, on the sofa"

He gathered more art on children's views of mother, then on the child's view of work. "For us, work is about earning money," says Goldin. "For children, work is important for life, work is wonderful and romantic. Children can give us the spiritual sense of what we do."

The Goldins were thinking big and living small. Their modest apartment overflowed with the paintings. More arrived from friends abroad and from embassies in Scandinavia. "Home was full," says Goldin. "Paintings everywhere. The paintings didn't belong to us. We belonged to the paintings." "It was impossible," Alla Goldin agrees. "A table we could reach only on two sides. A closet we couldn't get into. From floor to ceiling, paintings and more paintings. Paintings on the beds, on the sofa. No room even to sleep."

The solution seemed even more impossible. If the Goldins could establish a museum for children's art,

they would then have room to live. "Where will you get the money?" people kept asking, and the answer was not easy. For 70 years, Norwegians had been discussing the idea of a new national theater, and they still didn't have the money. "I'm not going to live another 70 years," said Goldin. "I'm in a hurry. We decided to act first and find the money later. Otherwise we would have waited forever."

In 1983 they saw an ad for a large house in Oslo costing 2.1 million kroner—there are about 6.5 Norwegian kroner to the dollar—and decided to buy it. The Goldins asked Hermann Gmeiner, their good friend in Austria, for help. Gmeiner ran SOS Children's Villages—a worldwide establishment of homes for orphans. He had commissioned Goldin to make films about the villages, and he agreed to stump up 700,000 kroner for a down payment on the house. A mortgage of 1.6 million kroner provided the rest—and money to get the museum started.

The Goldins moved in and slept on mattresses on the floor. "First the paintings lived at our house, then



Museum stairwell was converted into a fantasyland, an amazingly vivid jungle inhabited by exotic-bird art.



Singapore girl Lau Chooi Ping, 13, toured India, admired Mogul art, painted striking *Battle of Srinagar*.

we lived at the paintings' house," says Alla Goldin, who got more and more involved. She took over the job—doing it herself—of converting house to museum. That meant covering much of the wall surface with rich colors. It meant converting the main stairwell to a jungle, with ivy climbing everywhere, birdsong added. It meant preparing the paintings for display. In a room converted to a workshop she covered each picture with a transparent, nonreflecting plastic film called Filmomatt, put each painting into a passe-partout and then framed it.

When she was not at the hospital she was working in the museum. This left little time for sleep. The diagnosis was simple: she had to choose between medicine and museum. She gave up medicine. "We treat many, many people in this place—treat them with children's art," she says. "She's the one who does all the work—a doctor of medicine," says Goldin. "All I do is talk."

"I was used to having to get money from the state for my films in the Soviet Union," he explains. "The dif-



The work of Katia, 7-year-old French girl, graphic stick figures dance and skitter through ambient space.

ference is that in the Soviet Union it was not advisable to seek support for unpopular projects; you'd find yourself in contact with the KGB. In Norway you simply find people from different parties."

In Norway, which does not have a tradition of private sponsorship, Goldin pestered officials for funds. He got some from the Foreign Ministry for traveling exhibitions. And he asked for more from Lars Roar Langslett, who was Minister of Culture and is now head of culture for the Oslo municipality. "Rafael has the privilege and drawback of being a Russian by birth, so he's in the Byzantine tradition," Langslett says. "When people say no, he pretends not to understand Norwegian. There are specific rules which he thought could be ruled out. But there was certainly a lot of sympathy for him in the government. He operates skillfully through our Norwegian system with no great respect for our bureaucratic traditions. He had the impression that ministers had money in their offices and could take it out and give it away like an old king. It's amazing that he got money so quickly."

In 1986 the museum was ready to open, and Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland agreed to do the honors. She told the invited guests that these strange Russians had become part of the state budget in two years. It was the first time in Norway's fiscal history that that had happened.

"I talked to Gro," Goldin recalls. "'There are no private alternatives,' I told her. 'It has to be the state. If I can't get help here I'll have to emigrate again. I'm convinced that with your charm and warmth and daring you will prevent that.' The next day another woman called. It was Kirsti Kolle Grondahl, then a member and now president of Parliament, who told



Says Rafael Goldin of the work: "A fantastic idea; to draw the figures as musical notes . . . they dance."

me Gro said to help and asked, 'What is it all about?' " Almost before she had time to find out, she found herself on the board of the foundation set up by the Goldins and spreading the good word in Parliament.

"We got a lot of professional resistance," Rafael Goldin says. "People who know about art said it was crazy to have a museum for children's art. They tried to influence politicians to avoid giving us money. The art professionals didn't agree to our calling it art. 'Art' was reserved for adults; 'artists' were people who had been to the academy. The second group of enemies were child psychologists. They feel they have a monopoly of everything to do with children. They were irritated. Most of them don't have the faintest idea what art is. . . . They are in ministries where I applied for funding. Now both groups of opponents have been silenced. They can visit the museum and see for themselves."

The national government gives 1.76 million kroner a year toward the museum's annual costs of 3 million kroner (which includes interest of 250,000 kroner for the mortgage). More comes from admission charges—15 kroner per child, 25 per adult. An exhibition on nature and the child was subsidized by the Environment Ministry. The Consumers' Ministry helped; so did a development agency. Statoil, the nationalized oil company, gave 25,000 kroner last year, 75,000 this year. Last year the museum won a share of the annual Lego prize—330,000 kroner, which went to renovating the large attic, putting 17 windows into what had been a dark, uninviting area.

"They have made a marvelous thing out of the museum," says Langslett. "In former centuries, children were mostly looked upon as people who had not yet



Path in the Woods, by Veda Atmanand Diwadkar, 16, of India, is an accomplished, sophisticated work of art.

grown up—like an immature sketch of a grown-up. I think our century has gone a bit beyond that, and is more apt to recognize the intrinsic value of children's words and imagination and gifts. I suppose there are some art critics less prepared to accept children's works as art. In many of the things Rafael has exhibited you see artistic value without artistic training—perhaps because most children have artistic ability which dries up when they grow mature. I'm sure even grown-up people have a lot to learn from the museum."

"To respect children is very important," says Goldin. "This, people don't understand. People didn't look at the creations of childhood. It was a blank space on the map. Children may not be able to speak to us in our language. But *their* language is wonderful. What they express is a stage in our lives that we can't return to, and at the very moment they experience it. These are the originals.

"Among the youngest you find irritation and frustration. They're not respected as individuals. They



Anonymous work. *A Cat*, is by an 11-year-old who sums the animal up.



Elegance, energy and imaginative design distinguish the painting *A Field*, by Dupa Deepanie, 13, from Sri Lanka.

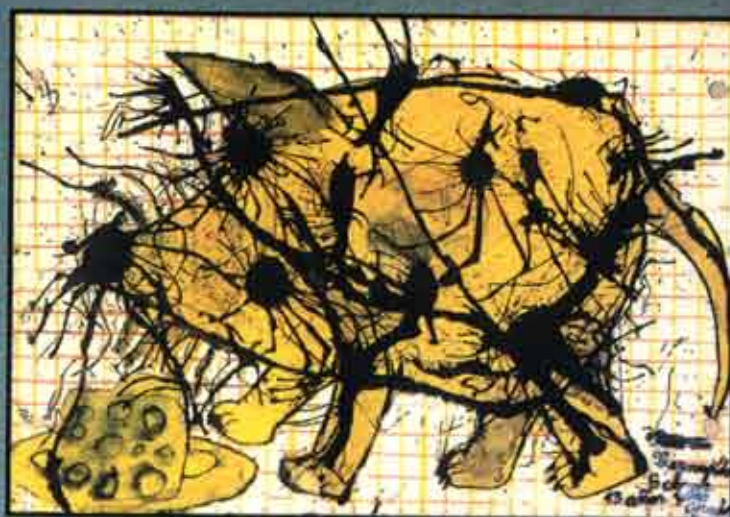


From Thailand came this trio of figures enigmatically titled *Compel*, by an 11-year-old.



Jesus is signed "Walker Blankship," 7, USA.

The Mouse is Eating Cheese is by F. Shoch, 13, Argentina.





Painting by an 11-year-old from Mongolia is untitled, but the essence of happiness is here.

Three-year-old Michiru Shioji of Japan expressed an unmistakable image in *My Father is Angry*.



Shruti Das, 11, India, did moody *Portrait of My Brother*.



Michaela Prochazkova, 7, a Czech, shows motion in *Small Music Boy*.

In *Destroy the World* by Thai boy, 14, stumps signify adult abuse of Earth.





A Picassoid piece, bike made from scrap wire is the creation of a 10-year-old boy from Rwanda.

have this burden to carry through childhood, and then at age 13 or 14 have a rage to upset everything. Had they been respected it would not have happened. The fact that it's children who have created this art makes the children who come here more interested. It's not something we push onto them. We inspire the children by showing them how good they can be at their age. It gets them going. Teachers often tell us they're surprised when the children start painting as they never did before. After school visits, children bring their parents and grandparents, and act as guides for adults. This has consequences for bringing up children. Many adults say they'll begin by talking to children in a different way. It can change the relationships between generations."

The museum has one room—festooned with art, naturally—where children who have seen what others can do try their own hand at painting. "Not all children are artists," says Goldin. "Not everything they produce is art. But we discover all the elements that exist in good professional art. They produce Cubism, Expressionism, Symbolism, Pointillism, naturalism, abstraction. We have found masses of Picassos and Rembrandts and Chagalls among the children. There are visual Mozarts here. We had an exhibition three years ago of Chinese children's art. There was a painting by a 3-year-old boy of an ox—all done with a single line. I thought it was lucky Picasso was dead. It would have been too much for him."

"It's not a question of stages, of clocks going at the same speed for each child," explains Goldin. He elaborates: "Some children are great artists at 5 or 7 and then it disappears. Some start in their teens. It's the opposite of the accepted belief. You do not grow to have an identity. You start as an individual with an identity and then become a mass creature. With age you lose your identity."

The visitors books bear graphic testimony. Every language seems to have an equivalent of the Norwegian "*fantastisk*," which appears with overwhelming frequency. "A fantastic opportunity to see the world's future great artists," concluded one visitor. "Your museum was *marvalles*," wrote Britain's Yael Elgar. Added Simon Hill: "Well worth the drive from New Zealand." The ultimate flattery was that some of the child visitors drew in the visitors books. One young American was so inspired that with unique, wobbly artistry—his father said that it was the first time he had seen his son write his name—he signed himself: THOMA.

Now the Goldins have an apartment about five minutes from the museum, with room to sleep—though this may not last. The place is filling with children's art, and Goldin likes to display it to visitors, talking as he moves about the rooms. "Korea, 5 years," he says, pointing to one wall; "7 years, Canada; 12 years, Sri Lanka. Canada, very interesting, 12 years. This is from America, 14 years." Alla Goldin, working in the kitchen, corrects: "15, Rafael."

If Goldin can pester more money out of the ministries, the museum will expand and be able to display the surplus from home and storage spaces in the museum itself. There are plans for a computerized catalog, for an underground theater and exposition space with a garden aboveground, and for a puppet theater.

The Soviet ambassador wants to have a show of the art in the Kremlin. Rafael Goldin would be only too pleased, if only as a starter. "Just as each country has its national museum, we would like to see such a children's museum in each country."

It could easily be a mouse, but Gregor Goricac of Yugoslavia, who is 5, says it's a squirrel. Of course.

