



Photographed by Frida Salvaty

ARTS

THE EYE OF A CHILD

Not many people try to explore their own personal pain through art. But, as MICHAEL BRADY reveals, Rafael Goldin, a Russian immigrant in Norway, did just that — and set out on a quest that ultimately led to the creation of the world's only permanent museum dedicated to children's art.

All too often, children's art — a subtle but essential trigger of the human creative impulse — is overlooked or discarded. Even liberal welfare-state grants assess its worth at less than five per cent of the total effort. Yet, were it not a tangible force, the century would have neither Chagall nor Picasso, nor other greats, who heeded its impulses.

Adults are conditioned to believe that aesthetics and creativity surface later in life, after childhood when one is functioning in the serious world. But that is self-deception because it ignores the obvious. Creativity flows like a stream; it has





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a source,” contends Rafael Goldin, who, together with his wife, Alla, has created a monument to inborn originality at the International Museum of Children’s Art and Culture in Oslo – the world’s first and still the only museum of its kind.

Finding and preserving this source of creativity has become Goldin’s goal, a quest in which he has been highly successful. As a careful connoisseur of originality, he has collected exhibits which hold the attention as in few other exhibitions.

Here are thousands of works, stark and sweet, vigorous and fluent. Fantasy blends with relevance. There are no schools or styles to digest. The messages are powerful in their purity, striking directly and deeply. The common denominator is a fresh view of ourselves.

Nor is this a passive place, in which to ponder what we might have been, had we not laid down our drawing pencils and watercolour brushes, as most children do during the process of becoming enmeshed in society.

The basement and ground floor of the majestic, renovated masonry

villa at Lille Freen in Oslo are action areas in which creative romping reigns. The floor reverberates to the beats of basic rhythms, throwbacks to the very origins of music. The effects multiply and the inhibitions melt away.



The close connection between the outpourings of creativity and the mainsprings of civilisation is not accidental. Goldin notes that major exhibitions of art from bygone ages always draw crowds; the need to contact our cultural past is universal.

But what of our own, individual pasts? Can we acknowledge those, too? He once told Norway’s renowned ethnographic explorer, Thor Heyerdahl: “You study the childhood of civilisations. I study the civilisation of childhood” – a remark that won Heyerdahl’s instant support for a travelling exhibition.

Born in 1920 in Kiev, Goldin took the first steps of his crusade to preserve children’s art in Moscow where he grew up. At school, he was drawn to the theatre, which in turn led him to film. His prowess in the media surfaced early. He was one of 20 applicants chosen from 2,000 to study under the famed director, Sergei Eisenstein, at the Film Institute in Moscow.

This was where Eisenstein polished the techniques that were to result in more than 50 films, starting with his stark 1944 thesis film, a portrayal of war on the Western Front – known in the west, of course, as the Eastern Front. But Eisenstein

imparted more than techniques of the art.

“His unique analyses of the components of living art, not just in film but in the entire sweep of the visual arts, alerted my senses so that, later, I could see the inherent value of the art of children,” Goldin explains.

He could quite easily have remained a comfortable member of the intelligentsia, yet in 1973 he chose to emigrate to Norway because “in Russia, we revered Nansen, Ibsen, Hamsun, Grieg – all greats of intellectual endeavour.”

In Norway, Goldin sought his media. Deep inside, there was the hurt of the separation from his son, imposed by distance and divorce, so he explored his pain through art and film. Working with leading child psychologist, Åse Gruda Skar, he toured Norwegian schools to ask children to draw and paint their views of their fathers.

The results were overwhelming. He was astounded by the “clarity with which children saw relationships which we feel are complex. Their pictures placed relationships in a broader social perspective,” he recalls.

The collected works subsequently

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formed the Father and Children exhibition, which travelled throughout Europe and was displayed at the United Nations in New York. The exhibition also became a book - and, of course, a documentary film.

Impressed by the Goldins' efforts, the founder of the SOS Children's Villages, Dr. Hermann Gmeiner of Austria, encouraged them to compile a parallel film on how children view their mothers.

That started a global tour to SOS Villages, at which women volunteers care for orphans. Four films were made and thousands more works of art collected. And Rafael Goldin saw what most adults are conditioned not to see: worldwide, the orphans lived and mediated their inner pains through art that was "at once direct, yet sweeping. The creativity of children," he marvels, "knows no bounds."

That truth brought the Goldins to view their collection of children's art - now tens of thousands of exhibits - as a resource to be preserved. It also triggered the dream of a museum dedicated to that resource.

In 1981, they and Dr. Gmeiner selected 1,000 of the best works for an exhibition in Vienna, which was



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later shown throughout Europe, the UK and North America. The response was so overwhelming that, for the first time, the couple realised that the materialisation of their dream was within reach.

Dr. Gmeiner agreed. Not just in words but with the donation of his own extensive collection of children's art works, collected from 37 countries. He also gave them NOK. 600,000 towards the purchase of a building in which to house the exhibits.

Thus was established the Foundation for Children's History, Art and Culture. It quickly proved viable. Selections from the growing collections, then numbering some 70,000 items, were shown at the Henie-Onstad Centre, west of Oslo. This exhibition drew a record 45,000 visitors and pushed the topic of children's art into the arena of public debate.

The art establishment, together with its bureaucracy, was taken by surprise. The very concept of children producing worthwhile art ran against all accepted precepts. No matter that Picasso once remarked: "When I was 18, I had Raphael's technical mastery; the rest of the time I spent learning to draw like a child."

How, adherents of this head-in-the-sand attitude seemed to ask, could works by people too young to attend an art academy be worthwhile? To the Goldins, the answer seemed obvious. To Alla Goldin, so much so that she abandoned her career as an anaesthetist and general practitioner and joined her husband full-time in pursuit of the goal of a permanent museum.

Their methods of realising that goal were as unconventional as their topic is universal. One of the major barriers confronting them was the peculiar Norwegian penchant for debate rather than action.

For example, it took 30 years to agree on a site for the new Oslo gateway airport. Yet, although the decision has now been made, the



debate trundles on. Similarly, renovation of the National Theatre was argued for 70 years before action was finally taken.

Given that litany of lethargy Goldin and the Foundation board knew that they must show the museum first and seek support for it later. "The converse," they reasoned, "might also take 70 years".

The couple were not wrong in their conviction that government funding would materialise once the doors were open. In 1986, the museum was formally opened by Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland - and current state funding supports half the annual budget.

If the Goldins' *modus operandi* seemed to have been that apologies are more easily offered than approvals obtained, there was sane logic in their approach. As all aware children will tell you, that's the way to deal with the adult world.

Last November, the museum's worth was recognised by the award of one of the three 1989 Lego prizes awarded annually by the Danish toy building-block manufacturer. The citation read: "For an extraordinary contribution towards the improve-

ment of conditions under which children live and grow up."

The award was worth one-third of a million Norwegian kroner, which the museum has now invested in much needed maintenance and renovation - and a statuette made, of course, from 183 Lego blocks.

Fashioned by sculptor Gunnar Westmann, it depicts *Yggdrasil*, the evergreen tree of life in Nordic mythology. The tree not only symbolises the everlasting renewal of life but also, as Rafael Goldin remarked on receiving the statuette, multi-channel communication through time - and between generations. ■

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