

Introduction

The Secret Art of Dr. Seuss

The Ted Geisel I knew was that rare amalgamation of genial gent and tomcat – a creature content with himself as animal and artist, and one who didn't give a lick or a spit for anyone's opinion, one way or another, of his work. He was, of course, immensely charming and polite about the whole matter, but when Ted fixed you with his calm cat-gaze, you knew when to shut up. It was easy to respect the simple modesty and curious privacy behind the gentle bluster of the man, but Seuss's apparent lack of interest in style, fashion, and any kind of analysis relating to his work astonished me. Only after years of friendship was I completely won over; Dr. Seuss was serious about not being "serious."

I loved Ted for his quiet, generous heart and genius. He had no difficulty lavishing praise on others and seeing himself – without false modesty – as your hardworking but ordinary craftsman. In that respect, he was much like Beatrix Potter, who, throughout her professional life, pooh-poohed the very high praise heaped upon her. In her old age, she bitterly denounced the business of children's books for belittling and patronizing children – thus the delight of knowing she had instantly claimed Seuss's *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* a masterpiece. She recognized Seuss's genius and cherished his amazing simplicity and truthfulness. His lack of pretense allowed him to play and enjoy himself with gusto. That rare quality, combined with an uninhibited clarity of vision, produced some of the best books ever published for children.

Ted and I met years ago and liked each other immediately. I gave him reason to laugh mightily on more than one occasion when I launched into one of my "wacky" (his word) subtext theories relating to my favorite Seuss books. I was a product of fifties psychoanalysis, and he forgave me that and my terrible earnestness. Ted was magnanimous. He wondered, simply, how I could take his work so seriously. What I took seriously was the sheer pleasure of it all while pondering how he came spiritually unscathed through life, pleasure principle intact and infant joy forever gratified. It is that infant joy that makes Ted's work so deliciously subversive, and the watercolors, oils, and sculptures in this collection of his unpublished art only confirm his dedication to pleasing himself.

There was certainly nothing cookie-cutter, bland, or trendy about Ted Geisel. These works abound in nuttiness, "political incorrectness," and lots and lots of cats. In short, you have entered Seussville, where questions and doubts are left at the door with the coo-coo something-or-other. Enjoy yourself. The slippery, sloppery, curvy, altogether delicious Art Deco palazzos invite you to slide and bump along, in and out of flaming colored mazes (where serious cats lurk and hang about), and past grand, even apocalyptic, oceans and skies. The book is filled with fabulous geometric conundrums. Their milky, thirties movieland dippiness best conjures for me the private Seussian dreamscape: a Cat in the Hat theme park world, where loops and hoops and squares and limp bagel shapes, all charged with exotic color, have the demented nightmare effects provoked by a dinner of green eggs and ham. But the architecture – ah! the architecture – playing with a sensuous, loony physicality that re-creates the gleaming, rapturous infant domain, where various openings are to be seriously investigated and explored. All this tricked out with enormous technical panache: Seuss the Craftsman working hard to make you forget Seuss the craftsman. The skill is in delineating a convincing and riveting dream. And so we dream Seuss dreams: a cat dream, finally. I counted at least twenty sneaky felines, but I suspect there are many more in disguise. Have a look at the fantastical "Cat Collecting Evidence in a Bad Part of Town" and tell me Ted Geisel wasn't one cool cat.

By Maurice Sendak
Ridgefield, Connecticut
May 1995