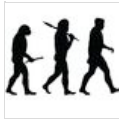


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By **JOANNE KAUFMAN**

New York

The husband-and-wife team of Margret and H.A. Rey may have imagined a different sort of immortality for themselves. But as far as their countless young readers were concerned, "we were best known as the parents of Curious George, the little monkey hero of our most famous books," Margret once said, referring to those sacred texts of childhood "Curious George" (since its publication in 1941, it has sold 27 million copies in more than a dozen languages), "Curious George Rides a Bike," "Curious George Flies a Kite" and "Curious George Takes a Job," among others.

'Curious George Saves the Day'

A look at some of the drawings by H.A. Rey.



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Courtesy of de Grummond Children's Literature Collection/ Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company
Final illustration for 'This is George. He lived in Africa.'

"I thought you were monkeys too," a young fan reportedly once told the Reys, doing very little to hide his disappointment.

"Curious George Saves the Day: The Art of Margret and H.A. Rey," an engaging exhibition at the Jewish Museum, does perhaps as much as Darwin to locate the missing link between man and monkey. George's spunk and facial expressions? There were an inheritance from Margret. The escapes—from jail, the zoo and the ocean, from atop a traffic light, from assorted angry hordes—that figure in each of George's great adventures? They echo the escape of the Jewish, German-born Reys from Paris, their adopted home, mere hours before the Nazis marched into the city.

The exhibition includes two-dozen pieces of ephemera, including correspondence, date books, journals and several witty homemade holiday cards, as well as 80 drawings, watercolors and photographs hung on—appropriately enough— banana-colored walls.

After fighting for his country in World War I, H.A. Rey (born Hans Augusto Reyersbach, 1898-1977), a self-taught artist, moved from

his native Hamburg, Germany to Rio de Janeiro to find work and to satisfy his deep curiosity about the world. His peregrinations included forays to the Amazon, where monkeys and the sun were out in full force. Rey was defenseless against the former, acquiring a pair of marmosets as pets. To deal with the latter he got himself a broad-brimmed hat, a bit of haberdashery that later worked its way into "Curious George."

A decade later, Margret (born Margarete Waldstein, 1906-1996), a Bauhaus-trained photographer and artist, moved to Rio looking for adventure, work and a chance to renew acquaintance with a fellow from back home: one Hans Reyersbach.

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The couple married, headed to Paris for their honeymoon in the mid-1930s, and ended up staying for more than four years, collaborating on books like "Raffy and the 9 Monkeys" (George's debut as a fictional character, published in the U.S. as "Cecily G. and the Nine Monkeys"), "Whiteblack the Penguin Sees the World" and "How Do You Get There?" H.A. supplied the art and the basics of a story. Margret spun it into a full plot.

In June 1940, with the German occupation imminent, the Reys left town on the first leg of a nerve-jangling journey through France, Spain, Portugal and Brazil—destination: New York—by bicycle, train, ship and grit.

The trip was fraught, particularly on a Lisbon-bound train where the couple was eyed suspiciously by an official—perhaps they were spies with stolen documents—and ordered to open their satchel. The benign contents: manuscripts of children's books, including a work-in-progress about a mischievous primate, "Fifi: The Adventures of a Monkey." After a heart-stopping moment, the Reys were allowed to continue on their way.

"Have had a very narrow escape," H.A. wrote in an understated telegram to a friend in Brazil soon after.

"I was fascinated by that escape story and wanted to look at the art through that lens," said Claudia Nahson, the curator for "Curious George Saves the Day." "Art was what saved them. Also, it was what helped them rebuild their careers here."

But as much as anything else, art was affirmation and antidote. Rey's use of vibrant primary colors—yellows, blues and reds—gave no hint of the wartime gloom away from the drawing board. "His optimism shines through the work no matter the situation," Ms. Nahson observed. "In 1939, the Reys were fleeing Paris, then going back, then leaving again. They were on the run, but he was still creating art that was very joyous."

The much-loved Babar books of Jean de Brunhoff and the Madeline series by Ludwig Bemelmans have a distinctly French look and flavor. By contrast, "Curious George," though conceived in France, is thoroughly American, George an all-American character complete with paper route. And while the detailed pictures by de Brunhoff and Bemelmans comfortably walk the line between fine art and illustration, Rey's are less ambitious images—simple and light on background.

Curious George Saves the Day

The Jewish Museum
Through Aug. 1

"In Paris, his work was more out of the Babar mold," Ms. Nahson said. But Rey's painterly style became problematic when he and Margret immigrated to the U.S. The American printing process that required color

separations, four of them per illustration, encouraged less complicated images. "His work became more linear," Ms. Nahson said. "He was a pragmatic person. He knew what he had to do to have his work published here."

The Reys' best-known fictional creation was similarly acculturated, starting—typically enough—with a name change, from Fifi to George. As the show's wall copy cannily notes: "The little monkey born in France acts out the fantasies of many immigrants: he lands an acting job in Hollywood soon upon arrival, advances research by traveling in a spaceship, and makes it to the front page of newspapers, all the while getting thoroughly Americanized."

Spread over two galleries, the show divides naturally into two sections: The Reys' life and work in the U.S. and—more compelling—their life and work in France. Margret's recently discovered photographs of Parisian café life, a street scene and a cityscape are juxtaposed with images of the City of Light as seen through her husband's eyes: charming decoupage cutouts of buses, cars, bicycles and narrow buildings.

"Some of the work in the exhibition has never been shown," Ms. Nahson said. "I was thrilled when I found the decoupage. It's wonderful and really speaks to their life in Paris."

The exhibition, which moves to San Francisco's Contemporary Jewish Museum in mid-November, is playfully anchored by two oversized structures: an arched, green-shuttered, pink mockup of the Reys' residential hotel in Paris and a bright-blue version of their house in Cambridge, Mass.

That haven was a long time coming. "Many people don't know what the Reys went through, and the role George played in their lives," said Ms. Nahson. "In a certain way it's a case of the child feeding his parents."

Ms. Kaufman writes about culture and the arts for the Journal.

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