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The Illustrated Masterpiece: Teaching the Artist Biography to Elementary School Children Using the Illustrations in Picture Books

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The Illustrated Masterpiece:
Teaching the Artist Biography to Elementary School Children
Using the Illustrations in Picture Books

Written by
Sophie Mueller

A senior project submitted to the department of Art History at Bard College

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A million thank yous to-
my parents for their endless support and encouragement and love, and for always being able to talk on the phone while I wait for the bus.

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Erin Pennell at ArtFORM, for showing me that art should be for everyone, and that it doesn’t have to exist in a museum.

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Introduction- The Necessity of Arts Education

Arts programs, particularly ones that focus on education, are constantly losing their funding. Even as Michelle Obama, the former First Lady of the United States, stated
that “Arts education is not a luxury, it’s a necessity. It’s really the air many of these kids breathe,” programs that benefit these kids are seeing their budgets slashed, and classroom educators are unable to get the training that they need to provide fulfilling educational experiences.

In an ideal world, museums would be free to everyone who wants to learn about art, and teachers would be paid at least six figures a year. But since that doesn’t seem to be happening any time soon, it is important for us to find ways to provide kids with wholistic, culturally-rich art experiences within their very own classrooms. I think that picture books could be a way of doing this.

There are a surprising amount of picture books that focus on elements of art history. In this case study, I am going to focus on books that tell a biographical story and books that contain illustrations rather than print reproductions of works, because I am interested in the choices that illustrators make to show specific aspects of the artwork, because the biography is one of the major methods of art history, and because I remember, as a child, enjoying illustrated books far more than books with print reproductions (the series of artists biographies by Mike Venezia come to mind).

Within this project, I plan on looking at and analyzing several books about four different artists, each a key member in the canon of western art history, and each an artist with a distinct style to learn from. Through looking at these books about Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Frida Kahlo, I hope to learn about the ways that the illustrators choose to introduce the artists and their unique styles to elementary school audiences, and the

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ways that these introductions can be implemented within classrooms, even by teachers that have not received extensive training in art history.

Chapter 1- Problems in Teaching Art

There is hardly a question about whether young children should be exposed to great examples of culture and art. It has been widely recognized that it is important for young people to gain a cultural education, and that experience with the arts is important
for early cognitive development. The Cultural Learning Alliance, a program in the United Kingdom that helps enable art programs and experiences, wrote in a publication defending their work that “Education is fundamentally concerned with the development of human potential through the generation, communication, and exploration of ideas, skills and knowledge…studying the arts supports achievement”\(^3\). However, these art experiences, particularly ones that enrich cultural understanding and visual literacy, are vanishing rapidly from schools.

While almost all education theorists agree that hands-on art activities are important for both cognitive development and hand-eye coordination, there is less of a push to encourage teachers to provide other kinds of encounters with art. These types of encounters allow children to connect with the past and with other cultures, as well as with a vast range of aesthetic ideals, but these experiences with art aren’t commonly found within kindergarten and elementary school classrooms. While these types of “arts and crafts” activities do provide some important educational experiences, it is necessary that educators begin to recognize the importance of art appreciation and aesthetic understanding.

Art viewing, despite expert recommendation, is frequently only a small component of early childhood arts education. In his iconic book published in 1973, John Berger estimated that “vision”, conservatively, makes up about eighty percent of our total sensory intake\(^4\). It should be the role of teachers, then, to help young people learn how to use this immense sensory intake to make sense of the world. Learning about art can take the shape of both both creative activities and also by looking at and experiencing art

works and later reflecting on what can be learned through looking. In a holistic art education experience, children would get the chance to have “aesthetic experiences (experiences with beauty) and encounters with art (reflecting on and growing from works of art and craft)\(^5\)”, as well as the more hands-on experiences typically associated with arts education.

These various types of experiences would form a “highly related structure”, influencing and interacting with each other, creating a more dynamic, interactive, and overall more educationally profound experience. As a child learns more, they apply this knowledge and change their experience. The Cultural Learning Alliance found in a study from 2017 that when elementary school children participated regularly in structured and guided arts activities, their overall cognitive abilities increased up to 17%, and that children from low income households who take part in these activities are three times more likely to later get a degree\(^6\). Providing context and knowledge about a certain type of art or artistic style, as well as knowledge about the culture that it comes from, is an important part of these structured art activities.

This educational model, however, requires direct action from individual teachers. Ideally, they would work to engage kids in dialogue, provide motivation, stimulation, and reflection. The educator plays a central role in this educational experience, a role that can be hard to fill, particularly without a background in the arts. Teachers who aren't specialized in arts education simply don’t receive the training (or the funding, for that matter), to provide holistic, culturally rich art experiences. And while there is no question as to the value of more traditional educational programs, art classes and


programs are found having to constantly justify their value and purpose, and are frequently underfunded. In order to move forward, it is imperative to understand the opportunities for learning and growth that art programs have the potential to offer.

Art projects, or even the simple act of supplying kids with art materials and letting them explore and play, act as ways for children to develop fine motor skills and stimulate their senses. John Dewey, one of the foremost researchers into the benefits of arts education, believed that knowledge was gained through an interaction with the environment, and that thoughts were influenced by perception, rather than gained through explanation or guided work. Experiences in the arts were viewed as ways to cultivate this sort of spatial and aesthetic awareness. Dewey’s educational philosophies led to the development of progressive schools, where students were encouraged to explore and invent, with art at the heart of the curriculum. However, although it was not his intention, many of Dewey’s progressive schools began to adopt a less hands-on teaching method, giving children an opportunity to create freely, but also not providing them with any guidance or assistance. Educators were not supposed to intervene in the creative process at all, believing that the outside world could stunt a child’s creative development. This “non-interventionist” approach to art education is still widely accepted and practiced in modern pre-kindergarten schools.

Discipline Based Arts Education, introduced in the 1980s, is a movement that recognizes the importance of experiences with art and seeks to show art as a not only a creative practice, but a field that has a wide depth of knowledge which includes art history, art criticism, and aesthetic theory. Proponents of this educational philosophy seek

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8 Clark, Gilbert A. "Discipline-Based Arts Education: Becoming Students of Art." *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 21, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 130-93.
to “educationalize” art and provide more well-rounded experiences, through teaching art history and aesthetics alongside art production. Educational theorists Feeny and Moravick wrote, in 1987, that “children’s response to art and an environment rich in beauty of all kinds is considered an integral part of learning about the arts”. This approach to arts education has been used in several museums, most notably at the Getty Center for Education in the Arts. However, because this type of educational experience is much more difficult to facilitate than a more simple classroom experience, particularly when teachers haven’t been trained in the arts, it hasn’t caught on in places other than museums.

The two common types of art experiences that are conducted in classrooms today are either the “non-interventionist” projects mentioned above, where children were left alone to explore the materials without any guidance or support, or what the Education philosopher Gaspar calls “fabrication activities”, where children follow explicit instructions given by a teacher to make an exact replica of a model. Both of these experiences fail to unlock the educational potentials of art, and fail to incorporate art into the wider curriculum of learning.

When teachers don’t intervene at all, studies have found that students become hesitant and are less likely to explore artistically. When teachers provide too much guidance, students often fail to see art as a way to express thoughts and emotions, but instead see art making as a simply physical activity. These experiences may have benefits for teachers (one requires little to no attention, while the other allows them to maintain a

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disciplined classroom), they don’t allow students to gain any kind of educational benefit from art making. It becomes the job of the teacher, then, to create a dynamic, thoughtful art making environment, where learning and hands-on, material based experiences are combined.

A study which took place in 1992 surveyed 10 nursery schools and found that around fifty percent of the time in class was spent on artistic projects and activities, but that, although they did help children develop fine motor skills and spatial awareness, almost all of these projects lacked the educational benefits that come from exposing children to art. Further, almost all of the educators surveyed recognized the cognitive benefits of learning about art at a young age, but lacked the knowledge and experience that would allow them to teach art.

Here is my proposal: picture books can be used to begin to teach about art and artists, and to begin to foster these skills in children. Teacher’s may not have a background in the arts, but the format of the picture book is familiar and comfortable. By presenting the art, not as an unfamiliar object, but as part of a larger story, it can be less unfamiliar to children, and easier to apply to their own lives and creative experiences. Illustrations, rather than print reproductions of the work, also foster a sense of familiarity and accessibility.

This genre of books, books for young children that teach some sort of historical or artistic lesson, has already been widely explored by authors and illustrators. I am not proposing the creation of a new object or tool for education; rather, I believe that these books which already exist can and should be used to supplement other learning activities.
Experiences with works of art, these “aesthetic experiences” do more than just give children a certain cultural literacy; they also give children a space to practice thinking about their own sensory experiences. It is through the senses that we experience the world and gain understanding. It takes practice, though, to be able to interpret sensory experiences and respond to them, either verbally or visually. It is the job of the educators, then, to help children understand, appreciate, and respond to what they perceive in art work. Books about art and artists help to provide the guidelines with which to do this. The familiar format of the book helps to create a comfortable, non-intimidating environment for a child to respond to the artwork or story.

Kerlavage, an educational theorist, wrote in 1995 that children “travel through three progressive and sequential stages” when looking at and developing thoughts about art. He outlined these three stages as “sensorial, concrete, and expressive”\(^{11}\). The sensorial stage describes children who learn best through sensory experiences. Children move to the concrete stage when their appreciation for and understanding of the work relies more on learned facts and less on sensory experience alone. The final stage, expressive, is characterized by an ability to think abstractly about artwork, and to have interpretive and analytical discussions about it. Picture books can be shared by children in any one of these developmental groups. Reading a book out loud and looking at the illustrations creates a compelling sensory experience. The books present facts about the artwork and the artist which allow children in the second stage to interpret the work through these pieces of information, and the books, when used in a collaborative classroom experience, give space for group discussions about the work.

There are several reasons that I am choosing to focus on the artist biography, as portrayed in picture books, rather than looking at, say, books about an artistic movement or the collections within a specific museum or gallery. The artist biography is a common way, within the field of art history, to approach various works of art. Looking at life the artist allows a person to learn about context in which the art was created. Separating the art from the artist causes the work to lose much of its meaning, as “works of art come into being through artists’ imagination, thought, and labor.”

There are problems with the art historical canon. Most of the “great artists” that it includes are European men, and most biographies of these men treat them as individual creative geniuses, rather than people working in collaboration with others. There has been a push against the canon, and rightly so. It is crucial to represent all sorts of voices and allow all sorts of stories to be told.

I believe, though, that it is important for children to encounter the canon. Although the artists that it presents are by no means the only people that children should learn about, the art historical canon is an important part of our culture, and teaching young people about these artists promotes common reference points, which can later be expanded upon.

The biography, also, is often presented as a narrative that children are already familiar with. There is a clear protagonist, and the story centers around them and their work. This creates an access point from which children can experience the art work. The familiar format fosters an ability for children to feel more comfortable around artwork and art history.

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While the biography can be reductive, it is also a method of learning and engaging with art that we as a society have accepted and which can be used to get children to engage with art and society in ways that promote visual literacy, empathy, aesthetic awareness and a general appreciation for the fine arts. It is true that “works of art are part of the society from which they spring.”\textsuperscript{13} Studying the biography of an artist is a way to study the society in which they lived and worked, and a way to better understand the works of art that they made.

Chapter 2- Different Kinds of Picture Books

While my research for this project focuses on books that use the method of biography, and introduce one artist and their work through illustrations, I found that there are a wide variety of types of images used in books that have been written to introduce young children to art history. They differ in format, methods of teaching and explanation, and, most importantly, content, both literary and visual. Here, I want to introduce and provide examples of some of the main types of art history books for children that could be used as successful teaching aids. After considering some examples of various visual qualities, and I will discuss why I have chosen to focus on the format of the illustrated biography.

The first type of book I want to discuss is the picture book that has been created by a well known fine artist, who has a career outside of illustration. While the visual content in these books is rich and satisfying, they are, with few notable exceptions, not the best teaching tools. These books, within the context of the arts, serve more as an interactive art piece rather than a tool for teaching. The primary thing that separates these sorts of books from the others that I have looked at is that the work of the artist is not the guiding force of the narrative. Instead, the story presented in these books does not have
anything to do with the art history or a particular visual artist, but has been brought into this art world solely through the images within them.

Some examples of these books are *Tar Beach* by Faith Ringgold, an artist who works primarily in fiber and soft sculpture and is best known for her narrative quilts, and *Ah-Ha to Zig-Zag* by Maira Kalman, an artist who is well known for her unique illustrative style. Both of these artists have careers outside of publishing and illustration, and here are using the format of the picture book to both tell a story and to share their artwork with a new audience.

*Ah-Ha to Zig-Zag*\(^{14}\) is based on objects in the collection at the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum. The book works alphabetically, and each object is shown next to a short text about its appearance or function. For example, the “W” page shows a painting of slippers from the 1800s with the text “Walk with me” (Fig. 2.22). The “P” page shows a purse, and the text reads “A long time ago, women didn’t have pockets in their clothes. WHAT?” (Fig. 2.23). The illustrations are all made in thick, layered paint and bright colors, a style typical for Kalman, and the text is written in a font that is used in several of Kalman’s other books, for both children and for adults. Even the text itself is a blend of description and joking statements that is typical of Kalman’s other works.

*Tar Beach*\(^{15}\), on the other hand, does not focus on a particular art institution, but is instead based on a quilt made by the artist and author of the book, Faith Ringgold(Fig.). The quilt is part of a series called “Woman on a Bridge” and is currently housed in the

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Solomon R. Guggenheim museum\textsuperscript{16}. The quilt shows a scene from Ringgold’s childhood (Fig. 2.25), and the story in the book is a combination of autobiography and fiction. The illustrations combine oil painting with quilting, and show a black family who lives near the George Washington Bridge (Fig. 2.24). Ringgold’s quilts are inspired by the geometric patterns in early African American quilts, and like those early quilts, they are frequently made from scraps of mismatched fabric. While the story in this book has nothing to do with art, the imagery speaks to both the work of a contemporary artist, and to a long craft-making tradition. This book can be read as a story, straightforwardly, or can be a part of a much larger discussion.

The second sort of book that I looked at presents a narrative story about a single artist, movement, or institution, but does so with exact print reproductions of actual artwork instead of an artist’s illustrations. When teaching art history, specifically, these books can be helpful because they expose audiences not only to examples of artwork but also provide information about the art and artist. However, these books seem to have an issue with accessibility— they aren’t tailored to the sensibilities of the kids they are written for. The reproductions of work are often low quality, and the works selected to be shown are determined by what is available to the publishing house. They are also often structured like textbooks for young people, presenting a straightforward narrative but not attempting to make it captivating. While they may be directly educational, they can also be less engaging than books that tell a story, and because of this, I think that they are less likely to promote a classroom discussion or inspire young artists to create on their own than more traditional story books.

There is a series of these books, written by Mike Venezia, about the lives of “great artists”\textsuperscript{17}, members of the traditional art historical canon. The minimal text within them follows a linear biographical narrative, which is paired with images of the artist’s work. These books are informative but seem to lack substance. Perhaps it is because they are targeted to a very specific and small age group (children in first to third grade), or perhaps it is because the images are often low quality or seemingly random. For example, in a book about the life of Frida Kahlo\textsuperscript{18}, a subject for children’s books that I explore later, there are 31 images, but only 14 of them are by Kahlo herself (Fig. 2.8), and on some pages, they seem to be chosen as a way to fill space rather than inform.

One page (Fig. 2.10), most notably, discusses how Kahlo studied European design, but pairs the text with a Modigliani painting and a portrait of a young saint by an unknown artist in the Italian Renaissance style. These images have almost no relevance to Kahlo’s own work, and seem distracting from the subject of the book. Other images seem to have been selected because they are part of the public domain or because the author has been granted permission to use them by specific institutions (Fig. 2.9). These images sometimes seem to have been selected, then, not for their relevance or specific educational merit, but instead for their availability.

A third type of book that I have examined focuses not on an individual artist, but rather on a specific art institution, most frequently a large museum, such as the Met in New York or the Guggenheim in Los Angeles. The visual content in these books is varied; some use print reproductions provided by the institution, and others contain copies of art works, reimagined by illustrators. Examples of this type of book include

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\end{flushleft}
Where’s Art, a book about the Museum of Modern Art, and You Can’t Take A Balloon into the Metropolitan Museum. These books have a wide range of focus, visually, and unless the group of children has the opportunity to visit the specific place depicted, I don’t believe that this type of book works well to introduce any one artist or style, but does promote a discussion about comparisons between artists and art work, particularly if the class has the opportunity to visit the institution and see some of the art in person, these sorts of books are incredibly valuable. They provide not only a glimpse of the artwork before it is seen in person (making it more familiar and making the institutional space less intimidating), but also provide context for the work and a basic guideline of what to look for when the reader does visit the museum.

You Can’t Take A Balloon Into The Metropolitan Museum, by Jacqueline Preiss Weitzman and illustrated by Robin Preiss Glasser, shows a young girl visiting the MET Museum in New York (Fig. 2.19). She is forced to leave her balloon outside with a security guard, who loses it and then chases it across the streets of Manhattan, through many notable New York City landmarks. His experiences chasing the balloon are compared to the art pieces that the girl sees inside the museum; he runs into a marching band while she looks at Invitation to the Sideshow by Seurat (Fig. 2.20), and when he gets tangled up with a dog walker, the girl is looking at Portrait of a Lady with a Dog by Jean Honore Fragonard (Fig. 2.21). All of the artworks in this book are print reproductions, placed in an illustrated background, making them stand out from the rest of the scenery in Manhattan. This book focuses on the museum, but also gives a general overview of

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attractions in New York, and seems to be written expressly for children who are visiting the city and going to the museum.

A fourth type of book that I have found contains images made by an illustrator, but the style and composition of the images is related directly to the work of the artist that they are representing. This type of book is usually formatted like a biography and focuses on the work of only one artist. The illustrator will use the medium that the artist they are representing is most known for, and emulate their style, palette, and imagery. I’ve found books with this type of illustration complicated; the illustrators have some sense of control in that they can show the artwork any way they want, but they are somewhat confined by the style of the artist they are representing. However, this sort of confinement can also be helpful in providing some sort of introduction to the content of the work of the actual artist, while still allowing for the images to directly relate to the story being presented.

For example, a book about Vincent Van Gogh, written by Eileen Lucas and illustrated by Rochelle Draper, tells the story of Van Gogh’s life, from the beginnings of his career as an artist up to his death at age thirty seven. The images in the book are created using the impasto oil paint and layers of short brush strokes that Van Gogh is famous for. Some of the images also directly copy identifiable paintings (Fig. 2.1 and Fig. 2.4), such as *The Potato Eaters* or *Starry Night*, while others simply contain elements from some of Van Gogh’s more famous paintings (Fig. 2.2 and Fig. 2.3), like a green chair from *Bedroom at Arles* or sunflowers from his famous still lives. By working in Van Gogh’s style, Draper has been able to introduce the reader to the type of work that

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Van Gogh made while still creating images that fit into the story that Lucas wrote. I think that this technique of illustration through emulation is educationally valuable, but, as the author never directly mentions Van Gogh’s style of painting, in order to recognize that the illustrations are in fact created in his style, readers need some sort of prior knowledge about the artist, knowledge that they shouldn’t be assumed to possess.

Another example of this type of book is Radiant Child: The Story of Young Artist Jean-Michel Basquiat\textsuperscript{21} by Javaka Steptoe. The book was published in 2016. With the exception of one page that contains a scene in a museum and a print of Picasso’s “Guernica”, the images in this book are made of paint and found images (from newspapers and photographs) displayed on pieces of wood that the artist found in Brooklyn (Fig. 2.12). The images contain many motifs that Basquiat put in his paintings, including crowns, eyes, and cars (Fig. 2.11), as well as being created in the bold, colorful, sometimes wild style that Basquiat is known for (Fig. 2.13). Unlike the book on Van Gogh, however, this book includes an author’s note at the end about Basquiat’s art and style, saying that his goal in creating illustrations in this style was to “show how his work has inspired me and to give young readers a sense of his artistic style. I hope they will want to learn more about him and look at examples of his actual work online and in museums.” Creating images that mimic the artist’s style is a way to expose readers to a distinct type of image while still being able to control the narrative that is presented.

The final type of book that I looked at also represents a single artist and their work, but in these books, the illustrator does not directly emulate the style of the artist,

but instead represents the artwork using a unique illustrative style, selecting parts of the work—either aspects of the artist’s style or images from their work—to include and parts to leave out. These books, on their own, are not necessarily the most educational, and they should be used in context with other examples of the artist’s work, but I think that they are the most visually interesting. A lot can be learned by looking at which aspects of the artist’s work the illustrator chose to include and which parts they leave out, as well as looking at how the artwork has been translated into an entirely different style. In this type of book, the illustrator selects which parts of the artist’s life and work are most important to show to readers.

The book The Noisy Paint Box, by Barb Rosenstock and illustrated by Mary Grandpre (who also created the illustrations for the Harry Potter series) tells the story of a young Kandinsky discovering abstract art and exploring music, painting, and design (Fig. 2.14). Kandinsky’s most celebrated work is primarily abstract, swirling colors which sometimes seem to resemble recognizable shapes or patterns but which don’t give any sense of a narrative. This creates a challenge for an illustrator who wants to represent Kandinsky’s work while still providing a visual narrative.

Grandpre accepts this challenge, and confronts this challenge by showing Kandinsky and those around him grounded in realism, but showing his work (and the music that inspires it) as swirling, bright, abstract colors, creating a contrast between the work and the world in which it was made (Fig. 2.17). Through this method of representation, Grandpre explicitly shows the contrast between the methods of figurative artwork which dominated galleries and museums when Kandinsky was beginning to

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work, and Kandinsky’s abstraction, and is able to represent how strange, beautiful, and eerie it may have seemed to critics at the time. One page, in particular, shows a crowd of properly dressed viewers in the foreground, illustrated in muted colors and all relatively the same height, looking toward a bright background of swirling colors and shapes, including the concentric circles and checkerboards that are found in Kandinsky’s artwork(Fig. 2.16). This contrast and all that it reveals about the artwork and its reception is only made possible by the illustrator’s choice to combine the style of the artist with her own type of illustration.

Of course, not all books fall neatly into one of these categories. Many use a variety of different types of images. For example, even in books that are entirely illustrated, it is common to have a brief, more academic overview of the artist’s life and a few prints of their famous pieces in the back of book(Fig. 2.18). In other books, specifically books about an art institution, print reproductions of actual artworks are combined with illustrated characters and scenery, separating the art from the world around it. While the books that I focused my research on are almost entirely illustrated, not all books about artists and art history are; it is common for books to use a variety of types of images.

One book that combines illustrations with reproductions of work successfully is *Linnea in Monet’s Garden*23, by Christina Bjork and illustrated by Lena Anderson. This book uses drawings, reproductions of artwork, but also photographs and even pressed leaves from the garden(Fig. 2.5). This creates the effect of peeking into a journal

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someone wrote while traveling, and feels personal while still maintaining a core based in education.

This book is about the artist, Monet, but it is also about his distinctive house and garden in Giverny, which inspired many of his most famous paintings and is still a popular tourist destination today. Because this book discusses a man, his artwork, and a specific location (and the changes in this location over time), it seems necessary to use different types of images. Photographs of Matisse in his garden are contrasted with illustrations that were made while Anderson was visiting the garden (Fig. 2.7). The illustrated figure of Linnea is shown interacting with a printed reproduction of a painting in a gallery (Fig. 2.6). The variety of images are carefully organized, and aid in presenting a vast overview of Monet’s garden, and allows readers to learn facts about the artist and see photographs of the place that is discussed, while still having a character that they can relate to.

In order to narrow the focus of my research, I selected to only look at books that discuss the biography of an artist using illustrations, without fully copying the style of the artist. I have found that these types of books present a story that is engaging to readers of any age, and while they can be used as teaching tools, they can also be read for fun. It is also interesting to examine what aspects of an artist’s work illustrators choose to include, when they aren’t limited by a specific type of media or attempting to replicate specific famous pieces. These types of books, I believe, are the most conducive to teaching art history, because they provide a specific type of biographical information that provides necessary historical and social context for the artwork being shown, while still allowing learning to be a fun, exploratory process.
Fig. 2.1

One evening Vincent van Gogh watched a family sit down for dinner. It was dark in their small house. Their only food was a plate of potatoes. Vincent didn’t share their meal. He was there to paint them.

Fig. 2.2

The wind shook the trees and made them fall. "I want to paint the fruit trees that move in the breeze," Vincent thought. He sat on the ground and painted the still-life with brush and oil.
Vincent used bright and
brilliant colors.
Sometimes he spread paint
right from the tube onto his picture.
He put the paint on thick
and left it that way.
Editors and fans of thick paint
covered his work.
Sometimes his paintings took weeks
to dry because there was so much
paint on them!

But when he felt better,
all he wanted to do was paint.
And then he painted some
terribly beautiful pictures.

One of those paintings
The Starry Night.
It shows a nighttime sky
that is bright with swirling light.
Our three Vincent said,
"Looking at the stars
always makes me dream."

The Impressionists!

Fig. 2.3
Fig. 2.4
Fig. 2.5
Fig. 2.6
Frida especially liked to paint flowers, plants, forests, animals, costumes, jewelry, and ancient gods and idols that were found only in Mexico.

Frida attended one of the best high schools in the country. It was located right in the middle of Mexico City. In high school, Frida learned how important the Mexican Revolution was to the people of her country.
Fig. 2.10

At first, Frida was her own teacher. She studied her father’s art books and copied the paintings of great European artists like Botticelli and Modigliani. But soon, just like the Mexican mural artists, Frida became more interested in the folk art of her own country. Frida lived the energy of these works of art and the simple stories they told.

Fig. 2.11

Fig. 2.12

Fig. 2.13
Fig. 2.14

Fig. 2.16

Fig. 2.17
Chapter 3- Biographies of Henri Matisse

“Creativity takes courage” - Henri Matisse

There are many children’s books that have been written about the life and art of Henri Matisse. They use different techniques to introduce the artist’s biography to readers, but they all attempt to get readers to engage with his colorful artwork and unique style, and to introduce them to one of the most important and canonical figures in the history of modern art.
Henri Matisse, one of the founders of the Fauvist movement, created brightly colored work which can be very accessible to children; his work rarely deals with difficult subject matter and, although it was pioneering, is easy to understand today. His work was also inspired by a variety of reference points, from Islamic tile work to great artists of the past like Manet, to the work of his contemporaries, such as Picasso. There have been many books written about Matisse’s life. They discuss his work in different ways, but the main intersection between their interpretations is discussion is his use of color. Matisse is a great artist to teach because his origin story speaks to the traditions of the romantic artist biography, a common trope within art history, and because the bright colors and organic shapes in his work make it more accessible and even enjoyable for younger audiences.

Matisse was born in Northern France in 1869, where his parents owned a flower shop\textsuperscript{24}. He originally intended to become a lawyer, and went to law school in Paris, but suffered from appendicitis the year after he passed the bar. While sick in bed, his mother gave him paints to keep him occupied, and he discovered a passion for art. When he recovered, he decided to become an artist, a career which his father did not approve of. He again left his home to live in Paris, this time to study art.

This type of origin story seems very common, repeated countless times for many artists. The figure of the great artist must overcome adversity, in Matisse’s case, sickness and the disapproval of his father, to pursue art. Representations of this origin story in books about Matisse work to situate him as a great artist, an artist with a “classic” biographical story, even before his artwork is explored.

Matisse’s early work, made in the 1890s, focuses on form and is much more somber than the later work that he became known for. His first solo show, in 1904, was poorly received. However, in 1905, after a trip spent exploring color St. Tropez, Matisse returned to Paris and began to show work with a group of artists who called themselves the “Fauves,” or “wild beasts.” Critics hated the bright, unrealistic colors. However, the group became quickly recognized as pioneers of modernism with Matisse as their leader.

The Fauves stopped showing work as a group in 1906, and Matisse became a part of the larger group of artists working in Montparnasse. Between 1906 and 1917 he also traveled, studying various types of artwork from around the world. His work became bolder in both color and free-flowing line. It was during this time that he created famous works such as *L’Atelier Rouge* and *La Danse*, which are both currently housed at MoMA\(^\text{25}\). It was during his time in Montparnasse that he also met Pablo Picasso at Gertrude Stein’s salon; Stein was an important patron to both artists. Picasso and Matisse would remain friends and sometimes rivals for the rest of their lives, and their work is often compared and discussed together.

There have even been books for children written about their competitive friendship and influence on each other, the most well known being *When Pigasso Met Mootisse*, a story where the artists are represented as a pig and a cow\(^\text{26}\). These books tend to follow a traditional story arch, with a conflict, a climax, and a resolution. The book, then, becomes less about the art itself and more about the tension between the two artists. These books are biographically informative, but tend to be less visually stimulating than books that focus more closely on the life and work of a single artist.


In 1917, Matisse relocated to a suburb of Nice on the French Riviera, where he worked alone for several years. In the 1930s he began to collaborate again with other artists from around Europe, such as Andre Derain, George Braque, and Raul Dufy. Matisse’s work from this period tends to show simplified figures composed of even bolder lines and colors. It was during this time that he painted “The Dance II”, as a commission for the Barnes Foundation in America.

In 1941, after a surgery left him in a wheelchair, he began to explore with brightly colored paper collages. He called this technique “painting with scissors”. This was his primary medium for the rest of his life, although he did design stained glass windows on commission. Examples of this paper cutting technique and the even more simplified style that it resulted in can be seen in his Blue Nudes series and in “Jazz,” a book of collages and thoughts in the form of short poems, published in 1947. Henri Matisse died in 1954 at the age of 84, after creating a museum of his work in his hometown in France. He is buried in the cemetery at Monastère Notre Dame de Cimiez, a church near Nice.

Introductions to Matisse’s work, I have noticed, tend to focus on color and shape, and are concentrated mostly on the more abstract compositions he made later in life. His earlier, more figurative work, tends to be overlooked. However, both types of artwork have educational value. I have chosen, therefore, to focus my attention on books that discuss Matisse as more than a man who “played with scissors”, as more than an abstract artist. When learning about the artist’s biography, it is important to see examples of different types of works that the artist created, not just what they are known most for. The following books use different narrative and visual strategies to show Matisse’s work, but

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28 Barnes Foundation
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they all examine the wide range of styles that he used, and in doing so, examine his versatility as an artist.

An example of this sort of intense focus on a singular aspect of Matisse’s work is seen in *Matisse’s Garden*\(^{30}\), by Samantha Friedman and illustrated by Cristina Amodeo. This book was published in 2014 in partnership with the Museum of Modern Art, and contains prints of some of the works housed in the MoMA alongside the illustrations. All of the prints, which are listed at the end of the book along with a short biography of Matisse, are from the late 1940s and early 50s, and are made of paper collage(img. 3.28). The book focuses entirely on this aspect of Matisse’s practice.

The illustrations themselves are made of paper cut outs. Bright colors dominate each page, and the figures that are represented, namely Matisse and his assistants, are made up of simple shapes, lacking in detail(Img. 3.23 and Img 3.24). Occasionally, outlines or small details are drawn on to the colored paper cutouts, like the buttons on a shirt or the rim of a teacup, but the images are almost entirely collage. By excluding details within her illustrations, Amodeo calls attention to the bright colors, and away from the figures that she is representing. Much like the images that Matisse himself created, these illustrations focus on the ways that colors, shapes, and lines interact, rather than trying to explicitly represent an image or scene.

The simple shapes that make up the figurative representations are shown alongside more abstract and organic shapes, reminiscent of the flowers and leaves that Matisse would cut out, but often included in the image represented on a page in a way that makes them seem less abstract. On one page, for example, these blobular kind of

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shapes become shadows on the ground, reflections on water, and parts of trees (Img. 3.25). By including these types of shapes into a larger figurative scene, the illustrator is showing readers the way that Matisse was inspired by shapes around him, and that while the shapes that are seen in some of his famous works may be abstract, they are based in figurative representation. Through this illustrative technique, Amodeo shows readers that even in the most non-representational artwork, patterns, shapes, and symbols can be seen. This can lead to a more active engagement and even a greater relatability to artworks that are more conceptual.

Even though the illustrations are made to emulate Matisse’s style of work, the prints of works that are included within the book are very intentionally illustrations that are part of the narrative. On several pages, the scene literally opens up to reveal Matisse’s work; flaps are lifted and, beneath the illustrated scene, the reader discovers full page prints of Matisse’s work, created in the same style as the image above it (Img. 3.36 and Img. 3.27). In this way, the illustrations are connected to the actual artwork: by placing them close together, the similarities in style and color become even more apparent. However, the book designers carefully separated the two types of images, just enough to ensure that the images made by Matisse would not be confused with the illustrations showing how he made those specific images.

Ultimately, I think that this separation is helpful, but only because the illustrations in this book are so similar to the copies of Matisse’s own work that are included. If the illustrations were created in watercolor, for example, then it would be obvious what was a Matisse what wasn’t. By dividing the illustrations from the prints, however, the reader is able to see how Amodeo used aspects of Matisse’s work to inspire the illustrations, while
still not confusing her work with Matisse’s. This technique allows readers to become very familiar with this particular aspect of Matisse’s style, and while this book only does focus on one aspect of his work, it does so incredibly thoroughly and thoughtfully.

**A Bird or Two: A Story About Henri Matisse**

A Bird or Two: A Story About Henri Matisse$^{31}$, by Bijou Le Tord, shows Matisse towards the end of his life, in Nice. This book was published in 1999 and is one of the oldest books that I have looked at. Le Tord is a French author and illustrator living in America, who has published several other books about well known artists, such as Claude Monet and Marc Chagall$^{32}$. While the book does discuss facts about Matisse’s life, these facts are discussed primarily in the context of how they influenced his artwork, the style of which is the main focus of the book. The illustrations imitate the style of his paintings while he was in Nice, using simple patterns and bright colors with black outlines and sometimes visible pencil marks. They appear to be created using oil paint on paper, except toward the end of the book where they become collage(Img. 3.22). Unlike Matisse’s Garden, which focuses on a singular style of artwork, this book shows the ways that Matisse’s art changed over time.

At one point, Le Tord writes that “Matisse thought, ‘I like it here. It is a paradise. I will paint greens greener than apples, yellows more yellow than lemons!’”$^{(9)}$. His color, then, becomes central to the discussions about his artwork. The illustrations seem to narrate this discussion of color more than they show a linear storyline: when talking about bright colors, they show scenes of ladies in fancy clothes or the Mediterranean sea(Img. 3.16 and Img. 3.17). When talking about how he also used “cool

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shady” colors, the illustrations show an interior scene at night, where Matisse himself is seen playing a violin (Img. 3.19). The illustrations follow the descriptions in the text exactly, as if to show proof, visually. This careful translation of words into images allows readers to not have to focus on imagining the ways that Matisse manipulated color palettes, but instead to focus on the effects that these manipulations have.

In this way, the illustrations are following the narrative of the story while imitating the style of Matisse’s paintings. However, Matisse appears in almost every illustration, as a central figure in the story. His work, then, is shown as an extension of his life. The objects within his paintings are shown as stylized visions of the world around him.

The trajectory of the book is more focused on presenting Matisse’s various artistic styles than on the linear story of his life. At one point, after talking about his use of color, Le Tord writes about how he also painted with black on white paper with a “fine, simple, curving line” (Img. 3.18). These drawings were made primarily before Matisse painted in Nice, but by showing them in contrast to his later, more colorful paintings, readers are exposed to his flexibility as an artist, and become aware of how he didn’t just work in the style being presented in the illustrations.

Toward the end of the book, when the figure of Matisse, still created with oil paint and graphite, is shown sitting in an armchair and cutting out shapes from paper (Img. 3.20 and Img. 3.21). This was a technique that Matisse employed at the end of his life, and it appears only in the last three illustrations, out of the twenty or so that are contained within the book. The final image in the book is the only image created completely in his collage style. The image has recognizable figures of birds and flowers,
which, paired with various simple shapes, create the only abstracted image in the book. It is a strange ending to a “story”, as the title claims the book to be, but a fitting ending to a book about the various artistic styles of Henri Matisse.

This book does not present that artist’s biography in a traditional way. Instead, the book focuses on the style of the artwork and the ways that Matisse explored his unique style. The author, here, changes the focus of the text, away from the figure of the artist and towards the artwork itself. If this technique is employed as a way to introduce an artist, then the author must be able to rely heavily on the illustrations to clearly depict the statements that they are making about the artwork. The book becomes less about a storyline and more about the images it includes. Le Tord, as both author and illustrator, was able to fit the text about Matisse to her paintings, and to create a visual representation to back up the claims she makes about his artwork and style.

This book would introduce children to the subjects of Matisse’s artwork, and the ways that these subjects are represented. By changing the style of the artwork throughout the book, a wide range of Matisse’s art is represented. This book, then, could serve as an introduction to Matisse’s work. Even with little or no prior knowledge of the artist or his work, readers would be able to understand, learn about, and, in the future, hopefully recognize works by Matisse.

The book The Iridescence of Birds, written by Patricia MacLachlan and illustrated by Hadley Hooper, also has images that follow a linear narrative, but in this case, they are less about the progression of styles Matisse used throughout his life, and more about revealing how he saw color and how it shaped his work. Moving through the

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book, the illustrations become progressively more vibrant and colorful, finally culminating in illustrations that are imitations of some of Matisse’s brightest paintings (Img. 3.8 and Img. 3.9). This slow progression toward a vibrant, fauvist color scheme shows how Matisse’s work was influenced by the world around him. This book focuses on Matisse’s paintings, and does not look at any of his later work or collages.

The book begins by showing a young Matisse in a completely grey landscape, in a “dreary town” (Img. 3.1). The next several pages have small introductions of color: a green chair, a yellow moon (Img. 3.2). However, the pages are mostly grey until painting is mentioned. Matisse’s mother painted plates with bright colors. Young Matisse is shown appreciating these colors and paintings, and as he looks more closely (Img. 3.3) at the art created by his mother he begins to notice other colors and patterns in the world around him: in a fruit bowl, in a bouquet of flowers (Img. 3.4), or in the woven silks made by people in a market place (Img. 3.5). Each new discovery is shown in bright colors and with bold patterns. Specifically, blue and red seem to dominate the illustrations.

It is only toward the end of the book that the young Matisse is revealed to be a future artist. The little boy shown on the previous pages now stands next to an older man, who is holding a set of brushes and paints (Img. 3.7 and Img. 3.9). On the following pages, the little boy continues to be shown with the older man, gazing appreciatively at his artwork and watching him draw. The illustrations narrate the idea that the adult Matisse was inspired by the world that he experienced as a child, and the experiences that he had as a child can be seen within the art he made later in life.

Often in artist biographies for children, the adult artist is represented as a larger-than-life figure. By showing how young Matisse’s life shaped his adulthood, however,
the author and illustrator are placing value on the experiences of childhood, and showing children who may read the book that their own experiences and thoughts are important and should be treated as more than childhood fantasies. This type of storytelling works to include the readers within the narrative of the artist; instead of a towering figure in art history, Matisse here is just a boy looking at colors. By fostering a sense of relatability between the reader and the artist, the author is able to translate this sense of familiarity from the artist to their works; readers, by seeing Matisse as a person much like themselves, children are able to feel comfortable and confident when looking at and talking about his art.

The style of the illustrations is reminiscent of Matisse’s work, but created with a medium unlike those that Matisse used: relief painting and block prints. Hadley Hooper says about her work for the book that she “spent months looking at reproductions of Henri Matisse’s paintings, drawings, cutouts, and prints. I studied his line, composition, and color.” This immersive research helped her to create images that are stylistically reminiscent of Matisse’s work, but are still unique to her own artistic sensibilities. She works with colors that are similar to those in Matisse’s work, and uses organic, flowing lines to represent shapes and images that are found in many of his paintings. She represents his work and introduces the themes that it includes, but her work is not directly copying his.

The illustrations show examples of some of Matisse’s representational work; images such as a vase filled with curving flower stems and windows looking out onto busy streets reflect various images that recur in many of Matisse’s paintings. Examples of his more abstract work can be seen in the patterns that adorn walls and textiles. These
patterns are shown as part of a recognizable image, while still imitating the abstract art that Matisse made. The illustrator is showing how, although his art may have been abstract, it was inspired by objects, patterns, and images in the word around him.

With two notable exceptions, showing the *Red Studio* and *The Dance* (some of Matisse’s best known works) none of the illustrations are direct copies of specific artworks, but instead contain patterns or images that are seen in Matisse’s work. One page, particularly, shows a bowl of fruit sitting on a floral patterned tablecloth. Both the pattern on the cloth and the contrast between the colors are reminiscent of Matisse’s paintings in Nice. However, without prior knowledge of the artist’s work, one might miss this reference point. Readers being newly introduced to Matisse’s work would then be able to recognize elements that they saw within the illustrations in the book in artwork, creating a sense of familiarity.

The book *Henri Matisse: Drawing with Scissors*[^34], by Keesia Johnson and Jane O’Connor and illustrated by Jessie Hartland, takes a different approach to teaching readers about Henri Matisse. Instead of following the development of a young Matisse, this book focuses on a different child, Keesia, who has been assigned by her teacher to write a report about Matisse and his artwork (Img. 3.10). The book, then, is her report, complete with illustrations of her and Matisse drinking tea and chatting and reproductions of specific works by the artist.

The text in this book reads like a report given by a student, but is also full of personal observations. Generally, I have found that books that read like reports, presenting facts without emotion or anecdotes are less interesting, particularly to readers.

first encountering the artist. However, this book manages to be read like a report but still engages the reader. The text is full of personal anecdotes, illustrated by small pictures of both the author and imitations of Matisse’s work. This creates a personal narrative within the facts about Matisse that are being presented, and result is a unique way of experiencing the artist’s biography and work.

There are several different types of images within this book. Both illustrations and reproductions of works by Matisse are shown, but so are photographs of the author and hand-written notes (Img. 3.12 and Img. 3.13). This collection of images make the book appear like more of a scrapbook than a story book. However, this variety of images fits well with the “report” style that the book has been written in. By showing illustration next to reproductions of the famous artist’s work, also, the book is showing readers that their own artwork is important. There is less of a distance between the “master artist” and the reader; fine art is suddenly less of a far away, intangible thing.

For example, while looking at landscape paintings that Matisse made while looking out of his window, an image by Matisse, made in Tangiers, is joined by a drawing by the illustrator, captioned with a handwritten note that reads “I drew this picture looking out my bedroom window. That’s my friend Natalie waving” (Img. 3.14). By showing Matisse’s work next to a personal illustration, the book allows the reader to see a connection between their own experiences and the art of this famous artist. This connection allows readers to see that art can be made anywhere, that it doesn’t have to be exotic or foreign. It can be made at home.

On a previous page, above a drawing of different types of patterns and designs, some similar to patterns found in Matisse’s work, the text reads “I like how Henri put so
many different patterns in his pictures.” The book then begins to introduce basic art analysis. Next to a painting called *The Family of the Artist*, the text reads “The patterns look busy, but his family looks quiet and peaceful” (Img. 3.13). This simple statement introduces concepts of pattern, design, intentionality behind the work, and contrast, without saying so in an obtuse way. These simple statements give readers something to look for in paintings—patterns—but also show that they can look further and see what the patterns do to the overall composition and statement of the painting.

This book gives more biographical information than the previous three, while still showing the style of Matisse’s artwork. However, any information about the images themselves rely heavily on either textual analysis or can be gained only by looking at the prints themselves.

All of these books use different strategies, both narrative and visual, to introduce Matisse, his life, and his artwork. What I found most interesting while looking at them was that, because of the different strategies that they employ, they each offer completely different information to the reader. While there does seem to be a focus on the paper cut out art pieces in particular, each of these books represents them in a different way.

I think that none of these books offer a complete biography of the artist, but that none of them intended to present just the story of his life. Through various means, they all discuss the ways that events in his life influenced his artwork and style. While one may not be able to learn the “who, where, when, and how” of Matisse through these picture books, every single one of them tries to answer “why”. The figure of the artist, in all of these books, is seen as a way of accessing and better understanding the artwork.
Each book offers a unique way of approaching Matisse’s life and artwork. Because of the narrow focus of some of them, however, a reader may have to explore more than one of them, or look at their illustrations alongside examples of Matisse’s art, in order to fully understand the life of the artist. However, I do believe that all of these books, although they work in different ways, offer readers the opportunity to encounter and better understand the styles of art that Matisse worked in.
Dear [Name],

I am so glad to hear from you! I hope you are having a fun and exciting summer.

I was so excited to see your artwork today! I really enjoyed looking at it. Your paintings are so beautiful and creative. I can tell that you put a lot of effort into each one.

I also noticed that you have been doing some research on [topic]. That's great! I think that you are really interested in learning more about this. I can see that you are a curious and inquisitive person.

I hope that you have a great time over the summer. I look forward to seeing you back at school in a few weeks.

Keep up the good work!

Sincerely,
[Teacher]
Here is Henri's Family

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I know there are so many different getheries in this picture. The colors are bright and powerful.

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Img. 3.16

When Henri Matisse
returned to Nice
by night
the brilliant sun
overlooked
everything.
He worked
at the sea,
in the pines,
and in the For
for the last
view.

Img. 3.17

Henri thought,
"I like it
here. It is
a paradise.
Green
grass...

Img. 3.18

He used it
on pure
white
paper.
A fine,
simple,
curving
line,
which
He called
an arabesque.

Img. 3.19

He also
painted
a cemetery
the wall,
and the
hills
as his
work.
He said, "I am strong because I do what is in my blood."

"Each" was also delicate and tight.
Chapter 4- Biographies of Pablo Picasso
“When I was as old as these children, I could draw like Raphael, but it took me a lifetime to learn to draw like them”- Pablo Picasso

Pablo Picasso’s life and work are difficult subjects to begin to teach, primarily because he spanned and invented genres. Coming out of a realist tradition, Picasso is often credited as the “inventor of modern art”, using artwork from around the world to inspire what would become the cubist movement. He is seen as “an idol, one of those rare creatures who acts as crucibles...who seem to body forth the life of their age in one person”35. How does one begin to introduce a man like this, in a way that can be understood by children? How do illustrators deal with the many genres that he worked in, creating a comprehensive flow?

Picasso was born in Spain in 1881. His father was a practicing artist as well as a professor at the school of fine arts and a curator at the museum in Malaga, Spain. His mother would claim36 that his first word was “piz”, a shortened version of “lapiz”, the Spanish word for pencil. Young Pablo Picasso’s first exposure to the arts was through his father, who was his teacher from age eleven until he attended the Academy of Fine Arts. After one year at the Academy, Picasso left for Paris, arriving in 1901.

During the period from 1901 until 1904, Picasso traveled around Europe, primarily spending time in Madrid and Paris. His work during this time, which became known as the “blue period” was often melancholy and painted in dark shades. In 1904, he began to add more color to his paintings, and transitioned into the “rose period”. Stories say that the blue period paintings were made during a period of heartbreak and when he

fell in love again he began to paint in rosy colors\textsuperscript{37}. However, the truth is that the blue paintings were made in a period of deep depression, inspired by the suicide of one of his friends in Spain.

The rose period ended when Picasso met George Braque, a painter whose work was darker, heavier, and more solid than any work that Picasso had seen before; Braque’s muted color palette and geometric lines were unlike any of the paintings his fauve counterparts were creating. The two artist, working together, created a new genre of painting, which became known as cubism. Picasso once described their collaboration as “two mountaineers, roped together”. Cubism is characterized by multiple angles and perspectives of a subject being shown at once, while simultaneously being shown as fragmented pieces that don’t fit together smoothly. Because space and shape were considered the most important aspects of cubist paintings, Picasso limited his palette to earth tones. In 1907, Picasso painted Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, a painting that today is considered a masterpiece, and was heavily influenced by both the cubist style and African sculpture.

In the 1920s, Picasso was introduced to leaders of the Surrealist movement, who would influence his work, resulting in paintings that were more expressive, and often either violent or erotic in nature. During this time, his marriage to Olga Koklova, a Russian dancer, was failing. Several critics have theorized that Picasso’s changes in artistic styles can be correlated to changes in his romantic life\textsuperscript{38}. He often painted portraits of the women that he was involved with, and a chronology of his many affairs


appear on his canvases. Picasso’s biography and career as an artist is closely entwined with an account of his romantic indiscretions.

In the 1930s, Picasso began to get more politically involved, and this new interest can be seen in the artwork he created during this time. Shocked by the bombing of civilians by fascist leaders during the Spanish Civil War, he painted *Guernica* in 1937, a brutal cubist depiction of suffering, created in black and white. World War II also deeply affected Picasso, who was staying in Paris when the war broke out. While Picasso wasn’t pursued by the Nazi party, he did see many of his Jewish friends taken to the camps or forced to flee. Picasso then made sculptures commemorating them out of cold, metallic materials. After the war ended, Picasso became closely aligned with the Communist party.

Picasso continued to create work up until his death in 1973. Despite his work being less well received by critics in his later years, Picasso continued to be an incredibly influential and important figure to many aspects of modern art and abstract expressionism. The Museum of Modern Art has sometimes been called “the house that Pablo built”39, and at its opening reception fifteen paintings by Picasso were on display. Today, he is seen as more than an artist, but as a cultural icon, and as a man who changed art forever.

Picasso’s work is difficult to introduce because it spanned so many styles and broke so many boundaries. Even today, his work appears incredibly modern and transgressive. However, although his paintings are widely varied, his work can be seen as a neat progression over time, and each period of work is distinct. This makes it easier,

in a way, to teach his biography and to see how styles of work corresponded with events of his life.

However, because Picasso is such a monumental figure in art history, authors and illustrators of children’s books about his life struggle to make him seem relatable to young people while still presenting biographical information. The books that I have looked at use a variety of strategies to look at Picasso’s life and art, and to present them in a way so that even young child readers can begin to learn about Picasso and the impact that he had on modern art.

The book *Paris in the Spring with Picasso*⁴⁰, by Joan Yolleck and illustrated by Marjorie Priceman, tells a story that takes place over the course of one day. On that day, Gertrude Stein, Picasso’s famous mentor and patron, hosts a salon in her apartment in Paris. It is attended by Picasso but also by many other notable artists and poets living in Paris in the 1920s.

In fact, several of these other artists are introduced before Picasso is shown, first appearing on page 14(Fig.4.2). He is mentioned before we see him on this page, but only in passing. For example, on a previous page the text reads that “these sketches are of Apollinaire and their friends Pablo and Fernande”(Fig.4.1). Picasso is being introduced here, even before we see him, as an important figure, and as a friend of these other artists.

When Picasso finally is shown in an illustration(Fig.4.2 and Fig. 4.3), he is wearing a blue and white striped shirt and standing in a studio, looking intently at a canvas. Behind him on a shelf are sculptures and a mask, and on the floor by his feet is a guitar. The text accompanying this picture describes Picasso working “all through the

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night”, but does not describe him or any of the items by him. A reader with previous knowledge about Picasso would be able to recognize the guitar as a recurring image in his work, the sculptures and masks as pieces of indigenous artwork that helped to inspired both Picasso and the cubist movement, and the striped shirt as a piece of clothing that became almost synonymous with Picasso. A reader without knowledge of Picasso’s artwork may not be able to recognize this object as iconic or as parts of other art pieces, but would be able to, when looking at artwork that features similar items, be able to recognize them as paintings by Picasso.

On the next page, Picasso is shown working on a painting (Fig. 4.3). At first, the painting appears to be just a mass of blurring colors, but eventually shapes take form and the reader can see that the painting in the illustration is a copy of an actual painting by Picasso, *Two Nudes*  


, a painting from his Rose Period which was heavily influenced by African artwork, when Picasso was starting to move toward a more abstract, cubist style. The text on these pages describes him looking at the canvas, and then the image beginning to take shape: “The women grow bigger...and squarer, so that they look very strong”. Again, though, the text does not reveal any specific information about the artist or painting, only this brief description. The reader, then, is required to do more research or to have previous knowledge of the painting.

Picasso, next, is seen with his girlfriend (Fig. 4.4), Fernande, whose “real name is Amelie but she has changed it, like other models in the neighborhood”. She steps in from the rain and Picasso dries her hair. The illustration here is tender, with Picasso caring for Fernande. However, the text, describing her as a “model in the neighborhood”, and later, through Picasso saying that “I think I’ll bring you to the soiree tonight”, shows a kind of
fickleness around their relationship; it is implied as not being particularly serious. Here, it is the text that reveals more information about Picasso and his life. He was known for being somewhat of a womanizer. However, a reader who didn’t know this may not pick up on the subtle tensions that the text reveals, and may instead just see a scene of a happy couple.

Picasso vanishes as a central character in both the narrative and illustrations (Fig. 4.5) until the penultimate page, where a crowd is shown at the “soiree” at Gertrude Stein’s apartment (Fig. 4.6). All of the artists and poets mentioned previously are in attendance, gathered in a room that is lined with brightly colored paintings. The text on the page says that Picasso “leads them” into a room, where his “brilliant black eyes see Gertrude under her picture”. The picture here is a portrait that he painted for her. The faces shown on the page are pointed in the direction of the painting, which, although it is simplified, is recognizable as Picasso’s famous Portrait of Gertrude Stein. Even a reader who had not seen the painting before would be able to recognize it as Gertrude Stein, since the illustrated Stein is wearing the same clothes as the portrait hanging above her. Picasso here is shown as a leader of the group; although they are in Stein’s house, it is Picasso who “leads” them in, and it is his painting that they admire.

This book introduces Picasso but does so in an overly simplified way. Facts about his life and art aren’t discussed explicitly, and in order for readers to recognize many of the images shown in the illustrations, they must have already experienced Picasso’s work. However, this book would be an incredibly valuable resource for readers who do know a little about Picasso’s art. They would be able to recognize imagery and paintings, and be
able to expand their knowledge of the artist with supplemental information about his friends, other artists working at the same time.

The book *Just Behave, Pablo Picasso*\(^{42}\), written by Jonah Winter and illustrated by Kevin Hawkes, takes a different approach, both narratively and visually. In this book, Picasso bursts into the scene, literally breaking through an oil painting (Fig. 4.7), and moving on to astonish and shock critics and art viewers. The book discusses not only Picasso as an artist and a pioneer, but also as a sort of rogue, dismissed by critics, although eventually becoming successful and celebrated.

The story line follows Picasso’s art through a number of different artistic experiments and the receptions of these styles, but the figure of Picasso himself stays relatively stagnant throughout the story. He doesn’t age, and from the beginning of the book when he is shown as a student, “surrounded by students twice his age” (Fig. 4.8), he is shown by Hawkes as a young man wearing simple clothes and with dark hair parted down the middle. This choice to show Picasso as a static figure shows the contrast between his various types of artwork, imagining that the art is changing while the creator isn’t. It also helps to provide a cohesion throughout the book; the only thing that remains the same as the art changes is the figure of Picasso.

The illustrations in this book are created with oil paint and show realistic figures and scenes. Although they are made in a medium that Picasso also used, the style of the images don’t seem to be particularly influenced by Picasso’s work. Examples of monochromatic paintings or cubist works are seen throughout the progression of the book.

(Fig. 4.9, Fig. 4.11), but these paintings are all direct copies of some of Picasso’s most famous paintings. The characters in the story aren’t represented in these varying styles. This choice by Hawkes to contrast more abstract paintings with realistic people emphasizes the critical reception of Picasso’s paintings, which is a theme throughout the book. The characters are contrasted with the paintings, visually representing the clash between realism and abstraction.

The consistent illustrative style throughout the book also creates a sense of cohesion that unites all of the various artistic styles that Picasso is seen exploring. By showing his paintings shifting in style but the rest of the world remaining realistic, Hawkes is able to show Picasso’s linear stylistic progression while still linking each new painting to the overarching story, the story of Picasso’s life. If each illustration was created in the style of the painting that was being discussed on that page, the book would appear jumbled and the story line would be more difficult to follow. Realistic images contrasted with examples of iconic abstract and cubist paintings allows readers to see the various styles that Picasso worked in while still viewing all of the paintings as the work of a single artist.

The specific art pieces that are copied in the illustrations are listed on the last page, along with information about when they were made and where they’re housed now. When images of these paintings are included in the illustrations, they aren’t always prominently featured (Fig. 4.10), but they are always clearly visible and recognizable. The paintings that were chosen to be included are usually either the most well known example of the particular style being discussed on the page, or are pieces that raised an exceptional critical response (Fig. 4.12).
I feel that the narrative of this book required the illustrator to provide specific examples of artwork. While other artist biographies focus on process or life events that inspired work, this book instead looks at works of art and their critical receptions. This book promotes the idea that self expression is necessary, even if other people don’t recognize your vision. The final page shows Picasso, alone and triumphant, as the founder of modern art (Fig. 4.14).

However, this book also promotes an idea that is common within the art historical canon, of the modern artist being a figure who works alone, and whose art defies public expectations and values. This is an idea that is almost always inaccurate. With a few notable exceptions, pioneers of “outsider art”, most artists create works that are influenced by and reflect the society that they come from. The idea of the lone artist can be seen in many of the illustrations in this book, where the figure of Picasso In one image, Picasso stands alone in a corner while a crowd looks at his newest painting, exclaiming (Fig. 4.10). Although their remarks are positive (“C’est magnifique!”), Picasso is separated from the critics.

On another page, a crowd of people stand in front of Picasso, throwing insults at him (Fig.4.12). Picasso himself is shown as a shadowy figure, apart from the critics but standing alone. While the faces of the critics are seen, Picasso has his back to the reader, creating a sense that, as a person reads about the life of Picasso, they are standing behind the decisions of the artist, against the people who criticised his work. In the book, however, no such people exist to stand beside Picasso. He is a lone figure, and creates art not for the public, but because of his own vision.
Just Behave, Pablo Picasso is able to show the many styles that the artist worked within, and does provide some facts about the life of Picasso. However, although the story line seems to function as a biography, it is providing some false information about Picasso’s life. The artist, although he did often work against critics, never worked completely alone. He was inspired by different cultures, artworks, and the people making art around him. To say otherwise is to not only be wrong, but also to perpetuate the narrative that artist’s work alone and can only find inspiration within themselves, a narrative that is untrue.

The book When Pigasso Met Mootisse, written and illustrated by Nina Laden, tells a story of two artists who work in very different styles and begin to compete with each other. Although the artists are represented as animals, this book is an example of biographical narratives that show artists collaborating and being influenced by each other, rather than working in isolation. Here, the myth of the lone artist, seen in Just Behave, Pablo Picasso, is changed; the artist, “Pigasso”, is able to create better work with help and influence. Also, by showing his work contrasted with the work of another artist working during the same time period and in relatively the same part of the world, Picasso’s style becomes more definable and distinctive.

The images that “Pigasso” creates are cubist; this is the art movement that Picasso is credited with inventing, and the style that most of his most famous paintings are created in. There are copies of paintings by both Picasso and Matisse, although any human shapes have been changed to resemble farm animals(Fig. 4.15 and Fig. 4.16). The beginning of the book begins by showing the contrast between their work. On one page,

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Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles D’Avignon* appears, while on the page facing it, is a copy of Matisse’s *The Dance*. The contrast between the two works is striking: Matisse uses flowing, organic lines, and his figures are positioned in a distinct landscape. Picasso, on the other hand, uses sharp angular lines, and, while the shape of his figures are still recognizable, they are much more abstracted. Although these two paintings are vastly different in style, they show the same sort of image: a group of women. They were also created in relatively the same time period, 1907 and 1909.

The images made by the two artists begin to blend together on the next page (Fig. 4.17), although they are still relatively distinct. Figures created in Picasso’s cubist style, painted in all blue like paintings from the Blue Period, march through a background filled with curving paper cut outs like those made by Matisse toward the end of his life. There is contrast here, both in the construction of the figures compared to the imagery in the background, and in the colors shown. Matisse was known for using bright “wild” colors, while Picasso often would experiment with monochromatic work.

However, it is not until the two animal artists begin to fight that the reader is able to see, directly, just how different their work is (Fig. 4.18). They both create an image of a fruit bowl, a classic still life, but use their own different styles to represent it. Again, Pigasso’s painting is angular, with many different angles of perspective, while Mootisse’s is bright, curving, and simple. By comparing the same image, created in two different ways, the illustrator is able to show exactly what characterizes paintings by Picasso and Matisse, and to reveal their differences explicitly.

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Nina Laden never describes the differences between the artworks of Matisse and Picasso. Instead, she depends on the illustrations to show variations in style and content. This lack of description is unique to this book, but by comparing the work of two artists, Laden is able to say something about both of their styles of work without having to describe the work itself. Because two artists are being represented, it becomes clearer to readers that the figures are being represented using both the illustrators own style, but also are influenced by the different styles of the artists.

While this book tells a fanciful story rather than a biography, it does allow readers to begin to explore two very different artistic styles, and offers a clear visual comparison of the two artists work. While other books explain how Picasso’s (or Pigasso’s) work was unique, and show examples of this distinctive type of art, this book puts it in contrast with another style, and allows readers to see for themselves just how different Picasso’s art was. Readers are able to draw their own conclusions about the artwork, relying on visual clues given to them through the illustrations. This allows them to practice a kind of careful observation that they can later apply when looking at actual works of art.

Picasso’s biography is difficult to represent both visually and succinctly, not because he had a particularly complicated life, but because the work that he made bridged so many styles, was so pioneering, and has received so much critical attention, by scholars and artists alike. It is difficult for illustrators to show these various styles while still retaining their own artistic integrity. This is perhaps why there are so few illustrated, narrative biographies about Pablo Picasso. In many ways, his work speaks for itself, and presenting it alongside a biography doesn’t necessarily add meaning. There are many
books that present his biography alongside prints of his work, but far less that try to tell an illustrated story about his life and art.
"We are all a little mad here. Did you ever notice that?"

"Of course!" replied a little girl with a bright yellow top hat. "And there's the Mad Hatter."
In time, word of Pigman’s talent spread throughout the pig province. Soon, art-loving pigs from all over lined up to buy his creations.

At the same time, Mortise was getting famous in the cattle community. There weren’t many households that didn’t own a “Mortisepiece.”

Some weeks later, all cows, with a great desire to see their new Mortisepiece, gathered in front of Mortise’s studio. As they were about to enter, however, a large cow suddenly appeared in front of them. The cow looked to be in a state of shock, with its head bent to the ground, as if it was searching for something.
Chapter 5- Biographies of Frida Kahlo

“Childish love. An exact science. The will to tolerate living, a healthful joy, an infinite gratitude. Eyes in the hands and a sense of touch in the eyes”—from the journals of Frida Kahlo

Recently I visited an exhibit designed for children at the San Diego Museum of Art about Frida Kahlo’s life and artwork. This exhibit was very hands on, including things like a photo booth where people could take pictures in front of a blue house with paper mache animals, plaster imitations of ancient Latin American sculptures, that inspired Kahlo’s work, which could be touched and picked up, chairs bent at strange angles which could be sat in to feel what it would be like to wear a back brace, and, my favorite part of the exhibit, a set of beds with easels that kids could crawl into and practice drawing the way that Kahlo did when she was bedridden. This exhibit seemed

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exceptional to me because it didn’t shy away from the traumatic aspects of Kahlo’s life, but instead explained them in terms of physicality, while still emphasizing her artistic work.

In the past five to ten years, a noticeably large number of children’s books have been written about Frida Kahlo. These books, like the exhibit, attempt to teach a young audience about Kahlo’s life and work. However, this presents a series of challenges. Kahlo’s life was challenging, to say the least, and while her colorful artwork, filled with animals and fruit, symbols that are recognizable to even the youngest audience, is shown to kids, facts about her life are often saved for older audiences. However, I don’t think that this is necessarily the best educational strategy. The hardships she encountered throughout her life were hugely influential to Kahlo’s work, and by understanding the context that the work was made in, viewers are able to have a richer, fuller understanding of the paintings themselves.

The challenge, then, is presenting Kahlo’s life to young people in a way that isn’t too scary, but still conveys the seriousness of her physical hardships. While it might not be appropriate to tell kids that a bus accident left her with pelvic problems that resulted in several abortions and miscarriages, it is still important to learn about the accident and how it impacted her life and work.

During her lifetime, despite circulating with some of the most famous artists of her time, most notably her husband the muralist Diego Rivera, her work was often ignored. Rivera was famous for his large scale public works, which are displayed on the walls of some of Mexico’s most important governmental buildings, but Kahlo’s work, on the other hand, is much more intimate. Her work is highly stylized and dream-like, and
over half of the paintings she made during her life are self-portraits. Kahlo’s work appeared in a number of shows, but outside of the artistic community, she was largely unrecognized during her life.

However, interest in her work has been increasing since a biographical account of her life and works was published by Hayden Herrera in 1983, with the help of the second wave feminist movement, which hailed her as an icon of female artistic creativity. Today, she has an almost cult-like following, with numerous websites, films, and books dedicated to the story of her life and work. Many claim that today, her fame has surpassed that of her husband.

In some ways, it makes sense that Kahlo has been adopted as a subject for children’s literature. She is known and recognized for her work with self portraits, a type of artwork that is frequently taught to children because of its varying layers of complexity. Her work, also, although it has surreal elements, is composed of realistic images, making it both interesting and relatable. It engages the imagination while still presenting a recognizable world. In theory, this would allow her work to be easily translated into illustrations for children, since it combines fantasy and whimsy with more commonplace imagery. If one was to look at her work alone, Frida Kahlo would be an ideal subject for children’s literature, a perfect introduction to the self portrait, as well as a first look into the world of Latin American art and surrealism, as well as folk art, the influence of which can be seen in many of her paintings.

Yet, Kahlo’s life was not filled with the things that childhood dreams are made of. Filled with sickness, brutal accidents, racism, sexism, socialism, affairs, miscarriages,
Kahlo’s life story isn’t exactly easy to translate into a story for kids. Although some of her work can stand alone and be interpreted on a very surface level (“she painted portraits of herself in traditional Mexican clothes because she was proud of her heritage”), many of her paintings deal with the pain, both physical and psychological, that Kahlo experienced throughout her life.

Writers and illustrators have not shied away from Kahlo’s life as a subject for children’s literature, though, and for this I would like to congratulate them. While her work often deals with painful or complicated subject matter, it is still beautiful and important, especially now that it has been embraced by, or at least included within, the western canon of art history. Translating a biography such as Kahlo’s into content that is suitable for young readers is a difficult and delicate task, one which illustrators have approached in a variety of methods. Here, I want to look at these methods and evaluate how successful they are in both introducing Frida Kahlo’s life and her individual artistic style.

Frida Kahlo was born just outside of Mexico City in 1907 in the Casa Azul, or the Blue House, where she would live for her entire life. Today, the Casa Azul has been turned into a museum that is dedicated to Kahlo’s life and work. Mexico was in a state of political turmoil when she was born, and the Mexican Revolution would begin in 1910. This revolution would result in a decade long armed struggle, and witnessing this would influence Kahlo’s political and ideological beliefs. She would later become a member of the communist party, and fought throughout her life for equality.

When she was six years old, Kahlo contracted Polio, which caused her right leg to be stunted. She would walk with a limp and wear long skirts to cover the unevenness for the rest of her life. She was frequently bedridden. Despite her illness, her parents would encourage her to play and go to school, and she was able to live a relatively normal life.

However, when she was a fifteen, another tragedy struck which would change her life forever. In the September of 1922, a bus that she was riding on crashed into a streetcar. A handrail from the bus impaled her pelvis, breaking it in three places and leaving two of her vertebrae fractured. Complications with surgeries after the accident left her unable to ever have children, and the recovery from this accident would leave her addicted to opioids. She had to wear a full body cast for three months, and wasn’t able to leave her bed. It was while she was confined to her bed that she began to paint self portraits. Her parents continued to encourage her, and even made her a special easel so that she could paint while lying down.

These beginnings of Kahlo’s artistic career, however painfully tragic, do allow an almost romanticised origin story, one which is full of high drama and speaks to the perseverance of the artistic spirit. However, by discussing these events in ways that don’t terrify children, authors sometimes gloss over the actual problems that Kahlo faced. This accident would cause a lifetime of pain and failed operations, which would cause Kahlo to decide to terminate three pregnancies and consider taking her own life. The resulting physical and emotional trauma would follow her throughout her life, and this pain would often manifest itself visually in her artwork.

I am interested in how authors and illustrators choose to recognize and portray Frida’s physical experiences and the ways that they appear in her artwork. I will be
looking at four picture books, all created within the past ten years, that focus on Frida Kahlo’s life and work. Although they engage with the same material, each of these books does so in a different way, which I want to evaluate as a means to introduce readers to Frida Kahlo’s life and artwork.

The book *Frida Kahlo and Her Animalitos*, written by Monica Brown and illustrated by John Parra, was published in 2017. It follows Kahlo as she grows up in Mexico, beginning with a young girl drawing on the walls of her bedroom, and ending with a picture of many tourists visiting the Casa Azul, presumably present day. The story, as the title suggests, looks at her life by focusing on the animals around her, animals that often make appearances in her paintings. In almost every illustration, Kahlo is interacting with some sort of creature, be it a cat, a monkey, or a parrot. This somewhat narrow focus helps to direct the reader’s attention, and later, helps guide the reader towards looking at very specific aspects of the actual artwork itself. The illustrations in this book are also loaded with symbolism, showing aspects of Frida’s life which the text doesn’t discuss, and showing examples of Mexican folk art, a style that had a huge influence on Kahlo.

The title page of the book (fig. 1) shows a young Frida Kahlo who appears to be painting the title on the page. She holds a small palette and paintbrush, and wears a flowing red skirt with flower designs, much like the dresses that she later paints herself wearing. A monkey sits on her shoulder, and at her feet, looking up at her are a chihuahua, a cat, a guinea hen, and a fawn. Facing her on the other side of the page is a brightly colored parrot on a perch, and some sort of hawk and butterfly fly above their heads, among simple drawings of the sun, moon, and stars.
This title page sets up a theme that will be repeated throughout the story. The animals chosen to be displayed on this page also seem significant. There are both tropical animals from Central America and domesticated pets and more recognizable creatures that can be found all of the world. This works to catch someone’s attention with images that are recognizable and relatable (many people have pet cats or small dogs), while introducing images that might seem more foreign or exotic.

In the beginning of the book, the young Frida Kahlo is introduced through her pets (fig. 2-3). She has a “cat with black shiny fur, the same color as her long black hair”49, who she can’t always play with because she got sick and “was in bed for a long time”. Frida doesn’t pay attention to her cat, who is sitting on a stool watching her, but is instead focused on drawing with her finger on the window. This image also shows her persistence as an artist and her everflowing creativity, which isn’t suppressed by being sick in bed.

On a later page, there is a picture of Frida’s pet eagle, named Gertrudis. The eagle is shown holding a red ribbon in its beak. The red ribbon is an image that reoccurs in many of Kahlo’s paintings. The text on this page discusses how, even when she is confined in bed, her “imagination could fly high”, like her eagle, comparing her creative endeavors to the physical feats she is unable to perform. This speaks to the persistence of the artistic spirit, and shows a positive message to readers, that physical inabilities don’t have to impair emotional or intellectual ones.

There is only one page in this book that doesn’t contain an image of an animal (Fig. 4). This is the page depicting the bus crash that would shape Kahlo’s adult life. In

the illustration on this page, Kahlo is shown lying in bed, from the shoulders up. Her head rests on a pillow that is shaped like a cloud. One of her arms reaches up holding a brush, to paint a bright red ribbon emblazoned with her own name, “Frida”, while her other hand is down covering her torso. A vine wraps around her arm which is reaching upward, covered in small leaves and flower buds. Over her other shoulder, there is an image of a factory with smokestacks emitting grey smog into the air. This is an overt reference to the rapid industrialization of Mexico, which Kahlo often blamed for her accident.

Across her chest, a bus crashes into a trolley car, starting a fire that spreads flames up onto Kahlo’s chest, covering her heart. Underneath the trolley car is another skeleton, this one not dressed up in the festive Day of the Dead style, but rather naked, partially covered by the wheels of the trolley. Scattered around the page are clothes: shoes, hats, a single basket. This adds to the extreme chaos of the image. However, despite the horror scene occurring on her chest, Kahlo looks upward, gazing peacefully toward her extended hand. Her pose is almost reminiscent of the Statue of Liberty, but instead of a torch, she wields a paintbrush. Her focus is not on the tragedy, even though it will impact her greatly, but instead she only pays attention to her art.

Kahlo is next shown painting in bed (Fig. 5), but this time surrounded by animals. Dogs, cats, and monkeys sit nearby and climb on her bedposts. A green parrot perches on a nearby wheelchair. Her leg, encased in a cast, is just barely visible from under a bedspread decorated with red rose buds, the same color as the flowers on the vine that wrapped around her arm. A cat sits on the floor next to the fake leg that she wore after her foot had to be amputated. The animals in the image show that Frida’s life has
returned to normalcy after her accident. She was able to persevere, to paint “when she was sick and when she was hurting, and… when she was happy”. In this image, there are hints of the extreme pain and unhappiness that Kahlo endured, but they are not emphasized, and instead the focus is on her artwork and her animal friends, once again speaking to ideas of artistic perseverance and fortitude.

This book, unlike many of the other children’s books about Kahlo’s life, the story here doesn’t end with her death. Rather, there is a sort of epitaph, a glimpse at her legacy today. On the last page is a picture of the Casa Azul with a sign that reads “Museo Frida Kahlo”(Fig. 6). On the roof are chickens, parrots, and cats, and on the sidewalk below, adults and children line up to enter the house. Above the house, a sun, in the same color and style as the sun on the title page, hangs in the sky, and in a nearby tree a vine, identical to the one wrapping around Frida’s arm, is hanging from the branches. This image, as well as the text above it, shows that Frida’s legacy continues today, and that her life and art continues to inspire people, young and old alike, and allows the book to end on a hopeful note.

However, while this book provides a charming motif to find within the artwork and incorporating historical images and folk art, however, the illustrations in this book don’t seem to be informed by elements of Kahlo’s style. The illustrator includes many images found in the work, but draws them in ways that don’t seem to emulate Kahlo’s own particular form of realism. I would say that this book is an excellent primary introduction, and that it is likely that readers would be able to recognize images from the illustrations in Kahlo’s work, if one was to look at an illustrated page beside a painting by Kahlo, there would be very few similarities besides content.
This style of illustration and storytelling succeeds in introducing readers to the artist, which then allows them to look more critically at various works. For example, after seeing various types of folk art within the familiar setting of a picture book, readers, particularly young readers, will feel more comfortable noticing these elements in a less familiar setting, like a gallery or museum. This, I believe, is the ultimate goal of this type of book. Nonetheless, it can arguably be more helpful to show readers more exact copies of an artist’s work within illustrations, furthering this sense of familiarity with the work.

This next book that I will look at does incorporate parts of actual paintings within the illustrations. They are never referenced specifically, for example, Frida Kahlo is never seen painting an illustrated version of one of her well-known paintings. Not directly pointing to the fact that the illustrations are referencing the artist’s work both aids and detracts from the learning experience of readers.

**Frida**, by Jonah Winter and illustrated by Ana Juan, an artist from Madrid, Spain. This is the first children’s book that Juan has worked on. Like John Parra, Juan takes images that are found throughout Kahlo’s art and incorporates them into her illustrations, providing a visual map for readers to follow. However, Juan takes this concept one step further and hides specific references to some of Kahlo’s own paintings within the illustrations.

While not directly copying the paintings, Juan is able to create illustrations that are just similar enough to be able to provide a familiar reference point for readers who, upon finishing the book, turn to Kahlo’s work. While print reproductions of paintings achieve this same end, I have found that they are often less compelling, and can even appear jarring next to the other illustrations. By copying Kahlo’s paintings but using a
unique illustrative style, Juan has made a kind of hide and seek for readers, which allows people to engage with the art and the book in whole new ways, through looking for designs that they recognize across media.

Juan is able to include these sort of visual references while still maintaining artistic originality. For example, on one page, two young Frida’s float through the air, holding hands (Fig. 7). Around them swirl images of Mexican coconut masks, a singing mermaid, and a moon and sun with faces. All of these images float in a background of shades of blue, the color of the sky and also of Kahlo’s childhood home. The image of the two identical girls could be a reference to the painting, “The Two Fridas”, a self portrait in which Kahlo paints herself holding hands with a double, fiercely gazing at the viewer. While this image of two Frida Kahlo’s, connected through outstretched hands, is a reference to a specific painting, Juan changes the image by having the two Frida Kahlo’s in the illustration looking at each other, not engaging with the viewer. This inward focus matches the story being told, where Kahlo is beginning to create and is inspired entirely by her own imagination.

On another page, a young Frida Kahlo looks through a microscope pointed at a pile of tropical fruit (Fig. 8). The fruit evokes a painting that Kahlo made in 1951 titled “Still Life With Parrot”. Both images show a papaya, watermelon, and various citrus fruits in bright, vibrant colors, cut into and half eaten. And while this particular image does not work to move the narrative forward, it does help readers make connections between the illustrations in the book actual examples of Kahlo’s works.

The images in the first half of the book are brightly all colored and filled with pictures of a young Frida playing with animals, drawing, and playing. About halfway
through the book, though, the illustrations begin to change in color and style. On one page, a young Frida is shown playing in a school yard as her notebooks seem to blow away, implying some sort of chaos (Fig. 9). As she is shown running to retrieve them, a volcano in the background spouts a perfectly circular ball of smoke and flame. Mexico city was founded in a volcano bed, but there was never any serious volcanic activity there during Kahlo’s lifetime. This image of the volcano is both a reference to the history of Kahlo’s homeland, and a premonition of the disaster that awaits on the next page.

This book boldly refuses to shy away from the bus accident, at least visually. While the text simply reads “A horrible accident happens. A trolley runs into the bus. Frida almost dies”\textsuperscript{50}, the image works to truly show the horror and magnitude of the situation (Fig. 10). The volcano in the background of the previous page has erupted, spewing fire across the sky, which is no longer a peaceful blue but instead has turned a dark, ominous purple. The page is thrown into chaos: people running and flying through the air, animals appearing to screech, the trolley car and bus crashing through the sky. The animals that Kahlo was shown playing with on the previous pages run away in fear, or else look on in horror as Frida herself is thrown through the air, eyes closed, in the upper corner of the right hand page. The volcanic flames behind her begin to appear like blood drops.

However, although the page is thrown into a violent, almost exciting chaos, details about the injury and the lasting impact it would have on Kahlo’s physical and emotional health are hidden from the reader. Throughout the rest of the book, this scene of pain is transformed into a story of artistic perseverance, and Kahlo is once again

shown in calm colors, this time peacefully painting on her easel or lying in her bed (Fig. 11). In one such image, text on the hem of her skirt reads that “But Frida doesn’t cry or complain. Instead of crying, she paints pictures of herself crying”.

By referencing specific paintings through illustrations, this book allows readers to feel familiar with the material when they look at Kahlo’s actual work. While this book does leave out many aspects of Kahlo’s life (there is no mention of Diego Rivera or her complicated feelings about being a wife), it does succeed in visually representing her artwork in the illustrator’s own unique style.

The book Me, Frida, by Amy Novesky and illustrated by David Diaz, takes a different approach to the biographical narrative. Instead of writing a full biography, the book takes a more “day-in-the-life” approach, and we first are introduced to Frida Kahlo as she sleeps next to her “new husband”, Diego Rivera, in the Casa Azul. The story centers around a few years of Kahlo’s life, specifically the years surrounding her first art show, rather than giving a wider overview. Rather than focusing on the physical struggles of Kahlo’s life, this book instead focuses on her artistic struggles, her trouble gaining recognition as a painter and how having a famous muralist husband both detracted and aided her artistic endeavors. Many of the other books about Frida Kahlo mention Diego, but don’t focus on their relationship.

The style of illustrations in this book is also quite different than the first two books. Rather than placing Kahlo in a sort of magical world, drawing from the surreal aspects of her own paintings, the illustrations here show her in a much more grounded, realistic landscape. This doesn’t mean, though, that elements of her work are lost.

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Although Kahlo doesn’t inhabit the world of her artwork, she is still seen creating paintings that contain the surreal elements that her work is known for.

On the first page, a contrast between the large-scale, dramatic works of Rivera and the smaller, more intimate works of Kahlo are already noticeable (Fig. 13). Kahlo sleeps on the left page, while Rivera sleeps on the right. They face each other, and between them are a row of dream-like buildings. The text on the page tells us that Rivera has been commissioned to paint a mural in San Francisco “far from her home in Mexico”, and that Kahlo, imagining herself in the far-away city, paints a portrait of herself there. While their dreams may take different sizes, Kahlo and Rivera are immediately shown as a team, an artistic duo.

The next page begins to show a bit of animosity, not between Frida and Diego but between Frida and her critics (Fig. 14). She is shown, wrapped in a scarf and wearing a brightly colored dress, and hair adorned with gold, in front of an easel, facing the words on the page, the words of her critics, as she paints. The text says that Frida “knew she was an artist, too”, and the look of self assuredness and determination on her face reveals this to be true. However, in comparison to her husband’s monumental work, her intimate portraits are described as only “passable” or “good enough”. However, Kahlo isn’t looking at the words on the right side page, but instead gazing forward at her painting, eyes focused only on her work.

This sense of antipathy is shown through the text on the page, while the illustrated image of Kahlo remains calm and focused. Here, again, a contrast is established, this time between Kahlo and the critics, but rather than showing this distinction visually, it is established through the difference between the text on the page and the illustrations.
The layout of this image, with Kahlo on the left side of the page with an easel in front of her, facing the text and a different, contrasting figure on the right side page, will be repeated. In the next spread, Frida is wearing a different dress, one with geometrically designed sleeves and collar, and ornamented with turquoise jewelry and flowers in her hair (Fig. 15). A bird sits behind her, perched on the back of her chair. But this time, she faces Diego, who is standing on the right side of the page. He wears a suit and tie, perhaps in contrast with her more traditional Mexican clothing, a way to once again highlight the differences between their artistic visions and selves. The text tells us that she is painting a portrait of the two of them, “something great”, a wedding portrait. This is a direct reference to a well known Kahlo painting. She paints Diego “big and herself small, just as the world saw them”\(^52\). Here, an important change occurs. Rather than contrasting Frida and Diego, she is shifting the narrative and instead bringing them together, contrasting the two of them, as a pair, with the rest of the world and their perceptions of the couple.

While their relationship in reality was fraught with turmoil, with multiple divorces, affairs, and seemingly unending health problems, this book presents them as a team. And, in many ways, they were. Although their lives were filled with competition and scandal, a brief scan of Kahlo’s diary, published after her death, will reveal that there is no doubt that Frida loved Diego, passionately and completely. This is one of the few picture books that I have encountered that speaks in depth about their loving and often collaborative relationship. Instead of being presented as an individual luminary, Frida here is shown as part of a two person team, a team of husband and wife.

In the wedding portrait that she paints, before it is displayed in public, Kahlo paints a pink bird, the same pink bird that has been perched behind her throughout the book. The bird is in flight, and in its beak is a ribbon, saying “Here you see us, me, Frida Kahlo, with my adored husband Diego Rivera” (Fig 16).

This book concludes with a bit of biographical information and a bit of creative liberty on the part of both author and illustrator. The text on this final page (Fig. 17) says that Frida’s portrait of herself and Diego was shown at the Sixth Annual Exhibition of the San Francisco Society of Women Artists. This is true, Kahlo’s first gallery showing was in San Francisco. After this, the author writes about Kahlo’s “best dress”, “ancient jade and turquoise jewelry”, and “braided jet black hair”, striking awe in the hearts of the members of the crowd, as they “stopped and stared at her in wonder”. Perhaps this wonder was a result of the illustration of Kahlo being dressed in exactly the clothes she wears in the portrait she created: a vibrant yellow dress and a bright red shawl, with turquoise necklaces stacked on top of each other and hair braided and adorned with gold.

Her painting is shown in the background of the illustration, but half of it, the half where she is present, is covered. Instead, Frida Kahlo herself appears in the foreground, blocking the image of herself, small next to Diego. Here, in the background, it is the painted Diego that is small. It almost appears that Frida is stepping out of the painting, larger than life, to greet the crowd who welcome her. With this subtle play of perspective, the illustrator shows that Frida has stepped out of Diego’s shadow, and into an artistic career of her own.

While this book does only focus on a small portion of Kahlo’s life, rather than giving a broader overview, it mentions several things that I have noticed are often
overlooked. First, it shows that while Kahlo was first and foremost a Mexican artist, she
did travel and had a more global outlook. While she chose to paint herself and the things
around her with elements of her home, this was a conscious choice, and not based on a
lack of perspective.

This book also shows her and Diego as a team, which they often were. As
troubled as their relationship was, there is no denying the fact that they aided each other,
artistically and otherwise. Finally, it shows how that, despite being a team, Kahlo’s work
was often overshadowed by the work of her husband. There are many reasons for this;
Rivera painted large-scale murals on well known public buildings, while Kahlo painted
intimate portraits. Rivera was commissioned by the government and had gone to art
school, while Kahlo was self-taught and painted primarily for herself. But perhaps most
importantly, Kahlo was a woman, and women in art are often overshadowed by their
male counterparts. This is one of the few children’s books that addresses this fact of the
art world, and although it is done subtly, it is important to notice, to think about, and to
perhaps lead to a group discussion when reading out loud.

This book, I think, works well in conversation with other books or stories about
Kahlo, but alone it provides a very narrow view of her life and her art. While it does
convey an important message, one that could lead to an important conversation about
gender and art, it doesn’t actually give the reader much information about Kahlo, her life,
or the style of her work. As an introduction, I don’t think that this book, working alone,
succeeds in providing necessary contextual information. In conjunction with another
book, or even a guided discussion about Kahlo, this book works to reveal aspects of her
life that a more broad overview would not show.
A fourth book, called *Viva Frida!* written by Yuyi Morales takes a different approach, both with narrative structure and with illustrative style. Rather than featuring drawings or paintings depicting Frida’s life, the images in this book combine media, using a combination of painted scenes and photographed dolls and puppets, created by Tim O’Meara. While this might restrict the abilities of some illustrators to accurately capture an artist’s style, in this book the medium actually add to the portrayals of Kahlo’s world. There is an emphasis on textiles and texture, and the deeply rich images are balanced by very sparse text.

Where some books rely on narration to follow the life of an artist, this book leans instead on images. On each page, words and phrases such as “I see”, “I dream”, or “I love” are matched with their Spanish translation. There is no further text explaining Kahlo’s life, but instead the images, which are created from a very wide range of media, are used to show scenes from Kahlo’s life.

There is a shift in illustrations about halfway through the book. In the beginning of the book, the phrases relate to physical experiences, like “I play” and “I see”. On these pages, Frida is shown as a puppet that has been photographed, wrapped in textiles and adorned with flowers clearly made of paper(Figs. 18-19). She interacts with monkeys and dogs that appear to be made of felt needlepoint. There aren’t many objects or images shown in the background of each illustration, but the pages are vibrantly colored, using shades of orange, deep blue, and yellow. These colors heighten the intensity of the illustrations and also draw attention to the physical forms on each page. The materiality

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and texture of the images seems to be emphasized, and this physicality seems to accompany the text on the page.

Halfway through the book, though, accompanied by the words “I dream”, Frida begins to be shown as a two dimensional painted figure. Suddenly, the texture of her clothes are less important, and she seems less grounded in a realistic, physical world. On this first page, a painted Frida Kahlo is shown adjusting her shoes on top of the head of a sculptural Frida, before flying off into a pale blue sky (Fig. 20) with boots that have white wings on them. Over the next few pages, she continues to be shown as a painted figure, bathed in rosy shadows (Fig. 21). The background of the next few pages are multi-tonal, fading from pastel shades of blue to pink, and, on one page, a blended green forest.

This very apparent transition in style and color emphasizes the belief of the separation between physical and dream, and the separation between the artist’s world and the word of imagination. Although Kahlo never considered herself a surrealist, many critics place her within the movement, which was very focused on the influence of dreams and the subconscious. By dramatically shifting styles, the illustrator seems to be referencing the importance of dreams in Kahlo’s work, essentially saying that her work was based on her lived experiences but also her subconscious ones. Until the end of the book, though, there is a stark difference between these two types of experiences, shown through the different techniques of illustration.

The last few illustrated pages begin to blend the two styles, bringing back the puppet Frida, but placing her in a softer seeming world, one with less high contrast. The images now fill the whole page, and while there is still an emphasis on texture, the images appear softer, less harsh. One illustration shows Frida and Diego together (fig.
22), their heads occupying the entire page. They are both clearly statues that have been photographed, and some textural elements do stand out, like her lacy shawl and his bristley hair. However, the image seems less in focus than the photographs at the beginning of the book, causing them to appear more soft. In the corner, behind Diego’s turned head, are the painted Frida’s legs, complete with winged boots, flying away from the scene. This is also, interestingly, the only page in the book that features Diego Rivera.

The next page, which has the penultimate illustration, is the only page within the book to feature a replica of an actual painting (fig. 23). On this page, we see Kahlo’s face painted on a canvas, the grainy texture of the canvas showing through the layer of paint. Unlike the painted depiction of Kahlo in the book’s illustration, this image is not smooth or soft, but has a kind of gritty realness. It is separated from the dream world that the painted Kahlo flew around in, and instead occupies the physical world. However, certain aspects of this painting do reference the dream illustrations on the previous pages, like the The painting shown is a famous self portrait, in which she sits in front of a tropical forest with a monkey on her shoulder.

The final image shows a statue Kahlo alone, occupying most of the page, surrounded by animals from both the dream sequence and that were previously needlepointed. She is surrounded by flashing lights, star-like, and the background fades from bright orange to soft yellow. This final page seems like a compromise between the two halves of the book and their respective illustrative styles, and between the physical and the dream-like that are shown in Kahlo’s paintings.

The different strategy that this book takes could be very beneficial, I think, to readers who already have a basic knowledge of Frida Kahlo’s life and work. It works to
emphasize some of the major motifs and patterns in her work, and shows, briefly, some of the most important aspects of her life, like the Casa Azul, her love of Mexican folk art, and her marriage to Diego Rivera. However, for a reader without any prior knowledge, this book wouldn’t be very informative, and, in fact, might even be confusing or jarring.

All of these picture books use different techniques, through both narrative style and illustration, to introduce the life and art of Frida Kahlo. One takes examples from her paintings to familiarize readers with her style. One focuses on just a few years of her life, but looks at these years very closely and critically, and only visually referencing paintings that she made during this time period. One doesn’t make specific reference to any one identifiable work, but rather uses a different visual theme, animals, to engage the reader. And one book doesn’t contain any sort of linear narrative, but instead relies almost entirely on the illustrations to reveal information about Kahlo’s artwork and life.

I don’t think that any of these techniques, working alone, could fully introduce a person to Kahlo. However, by combining any of these books individually with a guided conversation, with looking at examples of Kahlo’s actual work, or even just by reading them together, someone can begin to fully understand the rich and complex life of Frida Kahlo, and begin to understand how her work and the style of this work can relate to her cultural and lived experiences.
Fig. 5.1

Fig. 5.2
Fig. 5.3

Frida had an eagle named Guadalupe. Like her eagle, Frida's imagination would fly high.

When Frida was eight she saw a terrible accident and once again she had to be bedded for many months. This time Frida didn't want to stay in bed—she wanted to fly. Frida's mother needed her special paint and had to mix it with her own body so Frida could paint. Frida needed her long fingers and her own eyes to paint with.

"May your heart fly with you, darling. What do you want to fly with?"

Fig. 5.4

Fig. 5.5

Frida was most often seen with her cat and her woodcut knife. She was content when she was happy. She also painted when she was alone. She was never content to do men's work, she thought women's work was more important. She had her own identity and her own work, and she painted beautifully.
Fig. 5.6

And today, if you visit in Coac Octav, just outside of Mexico City, you might hear the sound of drums, see a black cat jump through the pyramids, or see the courtyard of the bright-blue house on Second Street where Frida and her mother once lived so many years ago.

Fig. 5.7

Fig. 5.8
Frida’s painting, Frida and Diego Rivera, was featured in the 9th Annual Publication of the Red Frankfurt Society of Writers Artists. It was her first show.

Adored in her black dress and necklace of roses, she left quite an impression. Frida walked proudly through the crowd. When people saw her, they stopped and stared in wonder.
Conclusion- Where Do We Go From Here?

These books all take different approaches to the task of introducing artists and their work to children. From a historical or aesthetic perspective, these different approaches seem to vary in success; some of them provide more factual information, some of them tell a story about the artist in a more narrative way, and some of them focus on the art work rather than a plot. I believe that these different approaches to speak to
different ways of learning and different things that people find engaging, and can be used in different ways to introduce art history to young people.

Art history doesn’t only teach people about the past, it also fosters a sense of social awareness, empathy, and aesthetic appreciation. It causes people to engage with both cultural literacy and visual literacy, which are aspects of education that are crucial but often overlooked. Introducing people to these skills at a young age allows them to engage with the visual language that permeates our society. I believe that it is not only beneficial, but essential to learn about art.

One of the reasons that art history isn’t a universally taught subject in elementary school classrooms is that the museums that house artworks are often perceived as elitist spaces, and not all people can afford to visit them. Museum spaces can also be intimidating to people who aren’t accustomed to them, particularly children. I chose to look at picture books because they are an incredibly accessible form of media for both children and adults. They are easy to obtain through libraries, and don’t require access to more secluded spaces, such as museums. They can be picked up by anyone with an interest in art, at little to no cost. Many people, both children and adults, are already familiar with the format of the picture book; introducing academic subjects through this format makes them seem more approachable.

My project focused on a very specific type of book: the illustrated artist biography. However, there are vast amounts of picture books that discuss all sorts of subjects within art history, and use all kinds of methods, both visual and narrative, to explain them. In the future, I want to be able to explore all of these types of picture
books, and to use them in ways that allow children more access to culture, history, and, most importantly, art.

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