

January 20, 2006  
Down Time

## In the Land of the Very Hungry Caterpillar

By ROGER MUMMERT

AT most museums, children racing through halls or sitting smack in the middle of a gallery floor might be cause for parental anxiety. But the rules for good behavior are different at the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst, Mass. It celebrates children and youthful imagination as much as art.

The museum, along with the National Yiddish Book Center a few hundred yards away, forms the heart of Amherst's Cultural Village, set in an apple orchard adjoining the woody campus of Hampshire College, a liberal arts institution with about 1,400 students. For a family that loves books and art, it's an engaging place to spend a day.

The Eric Carle museum, which opened three years ago, is named for the author and illustrator best known for "The Very Hungry Caterpillar" and "Papa, Please Get the Moon for Me." He and his wife, Barbara, the founders, have a home in the Amherst area and pop in from time to time. Mr. Carle's colorful work is always on display, and other artists are featured in rotating shows. Beatrix Potter was the subject of a recent one, and current exhibits include illustrations by Jerry Pinkney for "The Old African" by Julius Lester and works of Alice and Martin Provensen, artists who illustrated many of the Little Golden Books popular in the mid-20th century. Activities, as well as exhibits, transcend the boundaries of age, engaging everyone. You may even see big kids, otherwise known as adults, sitting on the floor (which is invitingly warmed by radiant heat).

On a Sunday in late November, the museum buzzed with families pushing baby carriages and herding children through the spacious lobby beneath oversized paintings by Mr. Carle. At the busy art studio, friendly greeters asked, "Would you like to make some art today?" and adults sat at low tables next to children who were busily drawing and coloring. Finished works were tacked onto the sides of a play house in the center of the bright room.

"On a school vacation week, we'll see a thousand kids," said Abbey Hendrickson, whose apron gave her away as the art lady. (Her formal title is public arts program educator.) "We help them make a connection between the visual and the verbal," she said. The art materials - crayons, markers, collage components - change as the exhibits change, and the children are encouraged to let what they have seen on display help inspire the work they create.

In one of the museum's three galleries, with a permanent collection of original works by Mr. Carle, a step-by-step display shows how he creates distinctive three-dimensional art by first painting tissue paper and then assembling cutouts that exude a luminous warmth. "Seeing the original artwork is a very different experience," said Alissa Imre Geis, an illustrator from Hatfield, Mass., as she bounced her 7-month-old son, Leo, on her knee. As an artist used to working in isolation, she said, she found the museum "exciting."

Ms. Geis sat in the museum cafe with three friends, all illustrators and former classmates at the Rhode Island School of Design. Now scattered around New England, the group gathers at the museum periodically to see exhibits, discuss their work and catch up. "This place is like a Mecca for us," said Linda Wingenter, an illustrator and children's book author from New Haven.

Just across a cornfield from the Eric Carle museum is the National Yiddish Book Center, a place with its own kind of magnetism. It is the headquarters of a grass-roots organization of 30,000 that preserves, teaches and celebrates Yiddish, the everyday language spoken by most of the world's Jews for the better part of a millennium. On exhibit are expressions of Yiddish in literature, music, theater, art and film. About 10,000 people visit every year.

The design of the center promotes the sense of journeying to another time and place. As you approach the building, its peaked roofs (dusted with snow on a recent visit) recall the wooden synagogues of an Eastern European shtetl, or town. To enter, you cross a wooden bridge leading into a darkened foyer.

Then come the books.

THE foyer overlooks stack after stack of them, all in Yiddish. Hanging from the rafters are colorful flags with the letters of the aleph bet, or Hebrew alphabet, in which Yiddish is written. The group has rescued 1.5 million Yiddish books - once in danger of being discarded and lost forever - since it was founded in 1980; 6 percent are here and the rest are in a nearby warehouse.

As visitors can glean from the center's permanent exhibition, "A Portable Homeland," Yiddish is part of a historical continuum. "Jewish learning has always been based on layers, on text and then commentary on text, and then commentary on commentary," Aaron Lansky, the center's founder, explained as he ushered visitors through on a late fall afternoon. "Yiddish literature was a lost layer in that continuum, which is odd because it is one of the most recent."

Mr. Lansky describes the quest to save Yiddish books in a recently published memoir, "Outwitting History." You can hear that same story, in

brief, in a 13-minute film, "A Bridge of Books," which prepared visitors to appreciate the permanent exhibition, which is in English.

Among the books and artifacts on display is a Yiddish linotype machine once used to produce type for printing *Der Forverts* (The Forward), one of the last surviving Yiddish-language newspapers. One of the several Yiddish typewriters is hands-on: children who have grown up writing on computers hunted and pecked enthusiastically on its Hebrew-character keys, tapping out their names. In a temporary exhibit on display until April, "The Wooden Synagogues of Poland," visitors peeked into a 12-to-1 scale model of the historic wooden synagogue of Zabłudow, Poland.

You can don headphones and listen to Yiddish radio programs, with music, dramas and commercials, and leaf through Yiddish sheet music, much of it with stylized illustrations. You'll also find an alcove where you can view an hourlong loop of clips from Yiddish films including "Yidl Mitn Fidl" with Molly Picon and "Tevye Der Milkeger" with Maurice Schwartz.

For those who want to take home a piece of Yiddish culture, thousands of Yiddish publications, including novels, children's books, cookbooks and illustrated sheet music, are for sale. A bookstore and gift shop also offers English-language books with themes related to Jewish life and culture.

If the children need a break between museums, have lunch in the cafeteria at the Carle museum or drive about two minutes to the Atkins Farm Market on Route 116. The Atkins family began farming on this property in 1887, and its farm stand has grown into a full-scale retail operation with homemade fudge, freshly made doughnuts and a cafe serving sandwiches and light meals. Don't miss the apple fritter.

If you're more in the mood for ice cream, drive five minutes west to Cook Farm on South Maple Street in Hadley. Its store, Flavors of Cook Farm, has ice cream made from the milk of its own Holstein and Jersey cows. French vanilla with orange zest and walnuts is a favorite choice, and in the spring, the adventurous can try asparagus ice cream, honoring the Hadley area's favorite crop.

### **If You Go**

AMHERST, Mass., is eight miles east of Interstate 91 on Route 9. The Cultural Village is on the Hampshire College campus, on Route 116.

The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art (125 West Bay Road, 413- 658-1100; [www.picturebookart.org](http://www.picturebookart.org)) is open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday to Saturday and from noon to 4 p.m. Sunday. Admission is \$7 for adults and \$5 for children over a year old. The museum has a sunny cafe offering soup, salads and sandwiches, with soaring windows that face apple trees and, in the distance, the Holyoke Range.

The National Yiddish Book Center (1021 West Street, 413-256-4900; [www.yiddishbookcenter.org](http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org)) is open from 10 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Monday to Friday and from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Sunday. Admission is free.

Atkins Farm Market (413-253-9528, [www.atkinsfarms.com](http://www.atkinsfarms.com)) is on Route 116 at West Bay Road in Amherst.

Flavors of Cook Farm (413-584-2224) is at 129 South Maple Street in Hadley, Mass. From the Cultural Village, drive west on Bay Road and turn north on South Maple Street.