

An Art Exhibit Honors 'Madeline'

'Madeline in New York: The Art of Ludwig Bemelmans'

By
Anna Russell
June 12, 2014 10:56 a.m. ET

Photos: Twelve Images Fine. The First One Is Madeline

[View Slideshow](#)



See some images from a new exhibit titled 'Madeline in New York: The Art of Ludwig Bemelmans,' which opens July 4 at the New-York Historical Society. © *The Estate of Ludwig Bemelmans*

In Ludwig Bemelmans's classic children's book, "Madeline," 12 little girls in two straight lines file past the Eiffel Tower, the Place Vendôme and Notre Dame. But Paris's most famous schoolgirl was born in New York.

In the late 1930s, on the back of a menu at Pete's Tavern near Manhattan's Gramercy Park, Bemelmans sketched the story's opening lines, "In an old house in Paris that was covered with vines." The book follows a resilient young girl, Madeline, and her boarding-school companions as they tromp through the city "in rain or shine."

Since the first Madeline book's publication in 1939, the series has sold more than 14 million copies and launched a trove of merchandise, from posable Madeline dolls to Madeline coin purses and sticker sets. The books have inspired countless adaptations, including an animated television series narrated by Christopher Plummer and a live-action film starring Frances McDormand as Miss Clavel.

"Madeline in New York: The Art of Ludwig Bemelmans," opening July 4 at the New-York Historical Society, celebrates the 75th anniversary of Madeline's debut. The show spans Bemelmans's mostly New York-based career with over 100 original works and artifacts, from Madeline manuscripts and drawings to his early comics and less well-known books for adults. Illustrated matchbooks, the artist's well-used paintbox, and the velvet hat that inspired Pepito's in "Madeline and the Bad Hat" will also be on display.

"He was profoundly influential," said author and illustrator Maira Kalman. "There was a level of sophistication that was brought into the books, and not just in an arch children-won't-get-this sense."

Bemelmans arrived in New York in 1914, at the age of 16. After failing out of school in Germany and, later, getting kicked out of his uncle's hotels in Austria where he had worked as a busboy, he was given a choice between reform school and America. A drawing he made years later of his ideas about the U.S. as a teenager depicts an elevated train line running over New York's buildings like a roller coaster.

He found a job at the Ritz-Carlton and stayed for more than 15 years, winding up as an assistant manager in the banquet department. He would often draw patrons on the backs of notecards or menus—or the kitchen walls, where they could be erased easily. He found work as a cartoonist eventually, but his continuing strip in the *New York World* was canceled after six months. It was only when a Viking Press editor, May Massee came to dinner at his apartment and saw his paintings that things began to change. "You must write children's books" she told him.

The idea for *Madeline* came after Bemelmans was hospitalized during a summer trip in 1938. He had been vacationing with his wife, Madeleine, and his young daughter in France when he was hit by a car while riding his bicycle. At the hospital, he picked up material that made its way into "*Madeline*": A young girl was having her appendix removed; the crack on the ceiling above his bed resembled a rabbit.

The book came out the year Europe imploded. "The war descended, Paris was no longer available, and here was this absolutely magical rendering of the city that everybody loved," said the exhibit's curator Jane Curley, who worked closely on the show with the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst, Mass.

"For me *Madeline* is therapy in the dark hours," Bemelmans wrote in a letter to then-first lady Jacqueline Kennedy in 1961. "It kept away his demons," said Ms. Curley.

He wrote several novels for adults, got a story credit for a Fred Astaire-Vincente Minelli film, "*Yolanda and the Thief*," and briefly ran a Paris bistro called *La Colombe*. In 1953, he painted 15 large-scale *Madeline* scenes in the playroom of Aristotle Onassis's yacht, "*The Christina*." Two panels from the yacht, and two restored murals and the sign from the walls of the failed restaurant will be on display in the exhibit.

Chuck and Deborah Royce, who purchased the *La Colombe* panels for their luxury resort *Ocean House* in Rhode Island, said they were initially drawn to Bemelmans's work because of his love for hotels.

"They just engender good will and happy feeling," Ms. Royce said of his murals.

The artist also painted the walls of what is now called Bemelmans Bar in the New York hotel the *Carlyle*. In return for his work, he lived in a suite there with his family for 18 months. He died of cancer in 1962. In the last year of his life he was working with Ms. Kennedy on the possibility of a book about *Madeline* visiting the White House.

The anniversary has inspired other commemorative events as well. Last month, Penguin released new editions of classic *Madeline* stories and republished a biography by the artist's grandson, John Bemelmans Marciano. And at the *Carlyle*, where well-dressed rabbits and ice-skating elephants adorn the walls, patrons can sip a special cocktail: "*The Ludwig*."