Title	Examining the legacy of Disney artist Mary Blair
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Publication date	45475
Original Citation	Stecher, G. (2024) 'Examining the legacy of Disney artist Mary Blair', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 27, pp. 9–23. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.27.02
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue27/HTML/ArticleStecher.html - https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.27.02
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Download date	2025-03-20 12:40:39
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/16055

University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 27, 2024, pp. 9–23
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.27.02

Examining the Legacy of Disney Artist Mary Blair

Gabrielle Stecher

Abstract: *Few women working as illustrators, designers, and animators in the golden age of American animation are as memorable and recognisable as Mary Blair (1911–1978). Today, she is best remembered for her unique style and design work captured in the It's a Small World park attraction, as well as her concept art for films including* Cinderella *(1950) and* Alice in Wonderland *(1951). While this article contextualises Blair's artistic development and her contributions to various Disney projects, I primarily interrogate how Blair's career and legacy have been narrativised, particularly in the decades following her death, by Disney-sanctioned writers and for readers of all ages. This paper invites us to consider why Mary Blair, more than any other woman active at Disney during the mid-twentieth century, has achieved more fame and fan recognition since her death than she did in life. The answer, I argue, lies in how Blair is positioned in writing.*

Few women working within the animation industry during its golden age are as memorable and recognisable as Mary Blair (1911–1978). In the decades following her death, Blair is best remembered for her unique style and design work preserved in the It's a Small World Disney Parks attraction as well as the concept art she developed for such beloved animated Disney classics as *Cinderella* (Wilfred Jackson, Hamilton Luske, and Clyde Geronimi, 1950) and *Alice in Wonderland* (Ben Sharpsteen, Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, and Hamilton Luske, 1951). Making the turn to commercial animation from the world of Fine Art, Blair began working at Disney in 1940 in roles ranging from colour and character designer to art supervisor. After moving away from the studio following the release of *Peter Pan* (Hamilton Luske, Clyde Geronimi, and Wilfred Jackson, 1953) to focus on her family and her own artistic endeavors, Blair freelanced as an illustrator and graphic designer for a vast array of companies. Still, she always returned to Disney projects, later working on murals for the California and Florida theme parks and resorts. Yet, despite Blair's prolific and inspirational experimentation with colour and Walt Disney's repeated championing of the artist, rarely was Blair's unique artwork recognisably translated to the screen and fully legible in an animated film's final cut. Certainly, Blair's stylistic flair and influence can be felt both in films she worked on directly and in many that have followed at Disney and Pixar. Nevertheless, her contemporaries at Disney long expressed difficulty in animating her vibrant, modern forms. Despite these challenges, her talents were widely and persistently recognised within the company, so much so that she was posthumously inducted as a Disney Legend in 1991.

Since 1991, Blair has garnered a cult following among Disney fans. Blair's art and influence are visible to those who know where to look, and Disney historians and enthusiasts are to thank for Blair's ever-increasing popularity. In the past three decades, Blair has become a primary subject of various titles aimed at both child and adult readers published by Disney Editions

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and other presses; these titles go a long way in providing accessible biographies of the watercolourist-turned-designer. They situate Blair within the history of Disney animation in the 1940s and early 1950s, as well as within conversations about women's contributions to a male-dominated industry. While this article contextualises Blair's artistic development and her contributions to her various Disney projects, I primarily seek to interrogate how Blair's career and legacy have been narrativised, particularly in more recent years, by Disney-sanctioned writers. This article invites us to consider why Blair, more than any other woman active at Disney during the mid-twentieth century, has achieved more fame and fan recognition since her death than she did in life. The answer, I argue, lies in how Blair is positioned in writing, regardless of whether or not she is the primary subject. I consider how, in keeping with traditional woman artist narratives that allow personal and professional relationships with men to drive discussions of how the woman's art was produced, accounts of Blair's labour are repeatedly framed by her relationships with men: namely Walt Disney, her artist husband Lee Blair, and the largely male-dominated animation studio. Further, I consider why and how certain aspects of Blair's life (namely her participation in the production of the controversial *Song of the South* (Harve Foster and Wilfred Jackson, 1946) remain selectively un- or under-written.

Mary Blair: A Brief Pre-History

As the various brief biographies of the artist suggest, Blair did not set out with commercial intention; working at Disney was not initially her goal. Born Mary Robinson in 1911, the Oklahoma native was ambitious from an early age, taking the little money her family could provide her to purchase the art supplies that would fuel her passion, simultaneously limiting the money her father could spend on alcohol (Holt 74). Blair trained as a fine artist at the Los Angeles-based and female-founded Chouinard School of Art in the early 1930s. At Chouinard, Blair demonstrated an early penchant for research as she worked to ground her artwork in realistic period costumes, emotions, and expressions. This impressed instructor Pruett Carter, the renowned ladies' magazine illustrator (Canemaker, *Art* 2). Blair was a talented watercolourist who initially sought a career in illustration. Upon meeting and falling in love with fellow student Lee Blair, however, her goals shifted to align with his: they were both to become serious fine artists. This pursuit, however admirable, would be derailed as the couple was lured away by the financial benefits of commercial art and animation. Mary, who married Lee in 1934, was indeed gaining recognition as an exhibiting fine artist; she had also proven a knack for design. After brief stints at the Ub Iwerks's animation studio, Lee and Mary would both transition to better-paying gigs at MGM under Harman and Ising and, later, Disney. This career path was not what Mary intended, and she went so far as to liken the couple's attempts to balance their fine artist sensibilities with the commercial promise of animation as a "Jekyll-Hyde existence" (Pollock 2). However, it was clear she had the kind of innate talent the studio was pining after. There was also chatter that Mary was even more capable than her husband, much to Lee's chagrin (Canemaker, *Art* 4). This began even before their transition into animation. A review of an Aquarelle exhibit featuring the couple written for the *Los Angeles Times* in July 1934 positions Mary as capable of painting "plaques that are even more radiant than those of her husband" (Hogue).

Nevertheless, one prominent example of public coverage of Mary Blair's pre-animation career is indicative of wider historical trends in the discussion of women artists, whereby her skill and success are, if not dismissed as amateurish, closely linked with that of a father, brother, or, in this case, husband.[1] To be fair, Mary and Lee Blair *did* influence each other; however, this influence was not to the point where Mary failed to be her own artist. Mary would, indeed, end up eclipsing Lee, but not before they were recognised, at best, as a unit, and, at worse, as a male artist with a female shadow. Writing for the *Los Angeles Times* in 1942, Arthur Millier describes Blair and her husband as demonstrative of "typical younger western artists", yet his account, unsurprisingly, favors Lee except in the places where Millier can playfully consider the two as a unit. The beginning of the article, for instance, states "Lee and Mary Blair were married in 1934 but people often mistake them for brother and sister. Their careers have been packed with similarities and as artists they are almost interchangeable." Mary's merits are overshadowed by quips that the couple are both blond watercolourists who work in animation and, hardly amusingly, hail from cities that both house "big jails". Lee is celebrated for his Olympic success as a gold medalist in the 1932 arts competition and, as an animator, for his "inject[ion] of strong, masculine coloring into the cartoons." Mary is recognised vaguely for winning a "number of prizes" but is mostly positioned as a double of her husband, following his lead at Disney and filling in for him as he left the studio to serve in the Navy during wartime. The lauding of the artist-husband and the positioning of the wife-artist as a follower is not unique to the Blairs: this positioning is emblematic of a historical oversimplification and dismissal of women's artistry.[2] Blair would soon prove, however, she could stand on her own.

Finding Mary Blair: Continuing Education and Stylistic Rebirth

When she started working for Disney, Blair was not immediately taken with the studio, nor had she yet set herself up to become, in the words of Didier Ghez (a Disney-sanctioned historian writing for Chronicle Books) "the most influential Disney concept artist of the 1950s" (55). Blair would undergo much artistic transformation before she could be recognised as a master colourist on par with—and even challenging the perfection of—the French painter Henri Matisse, to whom Marc Davis would later compare her (Ghez 53). Becoming the Mary Blair that fans today know and love was a process, the catalyst of which was the trip to South America.

Blair had tried to quit Disney not long after she was hired in 1941, thanks to a combination, first, of her disinterest in studio politics, then by both the animators' strike (29 May to 28 July 1941) and her current projects. Her ambivalence to her work at Disney was also complicated by a desire to further her artistic career from her home studio (Holt 130; Canemaker, *Art* 12).[3] Blair's retreat back to a more domestic life, with time intentionally carved out to devote to her pursuit of fine art, was not long lasting. Only a couple of months after her resignation, Blair would find herself not only again in the employ of Walt Disney, but also (along with her husband) travelling as a member of "El Grupo", the artists who accompanied Disney on his trip to Latin America from August to October 1941. Officially, the purpose of the South America trip was because Walt Disney had been appointed a Good Will Ambassador by the Roosevelt administration: fascist influence was spreading across the continent, so FDR enlisted Disney to help generate more positive relations between the southern countries and the United States. One means of doing this was infusing Latin American imagery and culture into Hollywood films; it was on this basis—artistic and cultural research—that Disney was able to bring a team of hand-picked artists with him on his travels. The trip would prove productive on both a political and studio level, and the two resulting package films were successful in both North and South America (Solomon 148).

The South America trip would, undoubtedly, be a major milestone in Blair's life, and a century after the artist's birth it would become a major fixture of the stories that are told about her. This trip is rarely depicted as anything short of a full-blown renaissance. John Canemaker, for instance, describes Blair's stylistic metamorphosis as occurring thanks to her total "immers[ion] into the colors, rhythms, music, smells, and tastes of South America" and subsequent "translat[ion of] real-life observations into pure distillations of color and form" (*Art* 13, 14). For Karal Ann Marling, Blair showed a proclivity for "absorbing" or "suck[ing] [color and forms] out of the culture" (Canemaker, *Magic* 21). Simplified for the youngest readers, such travel afforded Blair the discovery of a new, more vibrant colour palette: recent children's picture books on Blair fixate upon and celebrate the artist as a curious collector of colours with "bags burst[ing] with fuchsia, teal, aquamarine, indigo, lime green, and banana yellow" (Guglielmo and Tourville). Each of these descriptions testifies to Blair's capacity for responding to new environments in ways that inspired her to defy expectations and plan, create, and direct truly unique compositions.

Saludos Amigos (Norman Ferguson, 1942) was the first of two South American–inspired features born out of the Good Will tour, and Mary, along with Lee, was credited as an art supervisor. On top of the colourful watercolours that Blair produced while on location that would be incorporated into the film, she was responsible for creating concept art for two sequences, "Lake Titicaca" and "Aquarela do Brasil". Thanks to Blair's work, "*Saludos Amigos* began a new era of Disney color and styling, which enjoyed a glorious run through the postwar years" (Canemaker, *Art* 19). Her achievements with *Saludos* would extend to the second Latin American feature, *The Three Caballeros* (Norman Ferguson, 1944). While Blair's presence reverberates throughout *Saludos*, it becomes even more distinguishable in *The Three Caballeros*. The sequence featuring a brightly coloured bouncing train bound for Bahia in northeastern Brazil, as well as the round-faced Mexican children rendered in a modernist style with folk influences singing in the "Las Posadas" scene, are widely recognised as two of the least compromised concepts of Blair's art to make it onto the screen. The "Las Posadas" scene is especially notable as the caroler characters themselves are not animated, only their candlelight is. Blair's influence did not stop there: she also worked as costume designer for the film's live-action scenes, including the ruffled and one-shoulder dress Brazillian performer Aurora Miranda wears as she sings and dances alongside Donald Duck and José Carioca. Both *Saludos Amigos* and *The Three Caballeros* allowed Blair to solidify her professional position as an indispensable artist and stylist in a largely male-dominated industry, and the success of these projects would set her up to have a massive influence on the literary adaptations and anthology films that would define Disney animation in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Blair's radical stylistic transformation also played a major role in distinguishing her work from her husband's. Not only did the Latin America trip afford her recognition by and support from Walt Disney, but it also began more clearly to reveal competitive fault lines in the Blairs's marriage. During the trip, Walt had found not in Lee but in Mary a "new favorite artist" (Holt 136). Her novel, if not eccentric, colour palette was at the centre of this appreciation; as Blair would later recall, "Walt said that I knew about colors he had never heard of" (Canemaker, *Magic* 21). The increased attention and devotion from Disney did not sit well with a jealous Lee Blair; he became increasingly abusive for the rest of their marriage. Yet it would not be long before Lee was drafted into the military following the United States' entry into World War Two, allowing Mary to continue her development and to position herself as the reigning Blair at the studio. While he was deployed, according to Natalia Holt, he largely refrained from corresponding with Mary about her art and work for the studio (151). It is worth noting that, following the war, Lee did not return to Disney. Instead, Mary joined her husband in New York, where he established his own production company. However, she had proved herself so valuable to Walt that he allowed her to work remotely (Ghez 64).

On Location: Developing *Song of the South* (1946)

Aside from the discovery of her vibrant colour palette, what Blair and the studio learned from the South America trip was that she had a knack for research and thrived under conditions where she was being paid to observe and create. While the outputs of the trip became the most obvious evidence of Blair's stylistic rebirth and research capabilities, this was not the only time she was sent on location to develop concept art for an upcoming project. After spending time in Cuba and Ireland for other projects, in the mid-1940s Blair began work on *Song of the South*, the film that remains Disney's most controversial creation. *Song of the South*, a live-action/animation hybrid, was an adaptation of the "Uncle Remus" stories, a collection of African American folktales that were adapted and appropriated by Joel Chandler Harris for a white audience in post-Reconstruction America. From the outset, the production of the plantation film was met with fears and complaints that Disney's adaptation was fundamentally racist. To underscore Jason Sperb's apt phrasing: "In a way, *Song of the South* was always 'of a different time'—that is, it was anachronistic even when it was made" (37). To this day, *Song* occupies a prominent place in the discourse surrounding Disney and race despite not being readily available. The film has not had a theatrical re-release since 1986, nor has the full film been made available via home video in the United States (though it has been released on video and television in countries such as the UK as recently as the early 2000s). No matter how executives have tried to distance the cultural giant from this film, *Song of the South* remains a spectral presence that continues to haunt Disney's reputation.

Except with Holt's *The Queens of Animation*, *Song of the South* is only quickly glossed over in discussions of Blair, despite animator Ken Anderson stating that the film was "inspired to a great degree by Mary Blair" (Johnson 221). Writers on Blair have, unsurprisingly, largely ignored and/or have been uncritical about her participation in the production of a film widely understood as romanticising America's racist past. By attempting to absolve themselves from participating in, much less provoking, any critical discourse about the film and Blair's role in its production, such writers undermine their otherwise nuanced takes on the artist and become complacent in disseminating not only a version of Disney history that fails to reckon with its social and political missteps, but also in ignoring what remains the most overlooked the aspect of Blair's legacy.

Take, for example, Disney historian Didier Ghez's account in *The Hidden Art of Disney's Mid-Century Era*, the fourth installment in his series *They Drew as They Pleased*. Disney-sanctioned historians like Ghez, with his rhetorical framing of *Song of the South* as part of Disney's mid-century push for a nostalgic celebration of Americana, led careful readers to ask questions about not just Blair's role in its production, but also why he and others refuse to engage more explicitly with the film's racial and historical controversy—a fact highly publicised during its release. In a page-and-a-half section subtitled “Americana”, Ghez situates Blair’s trip to Atlanta as the next logical installment in her grand research tour, quoting *Atlanta Constitution* coverage that the artist, after meeting local historian and artist Wilbur G. Kurtz, “viewed with enthusiasm paintings [Kurtz] ha[d] done depicting old plantation scenes” and visited “the old plantation home of Joseph Addison Turner, where Joel Chandler Harris first learned to type, read good literature, and write” (63). In this depiction, Blair is discussed as lacking any critical awareness, and described as simply absorbing an environment curated specifically for her project. As a whole, Ghez refuses to inject any real argument or criticism into his coverage of this moment in Blair’s career or the politics and controversy of *Song of the South*. Instead, he lets the section conclude before transitioning to brief coverage of the nostalgia and folklore projects *So Dear to My Heart* (Harold D. Schuster and Hamilton Luske, 1948) and *Johnny Appleseed* (Wilfred Jackson, 1948), using Blair’s own words to cover this obvious intellectual gap: “I want to know what a Georgia cotton field looks like and all about the briar patch […] I want to find out about the weather and the terrain and to get the feel of Georgia myself” (63).

But what doesn’t Ghez include? The original *Atlanta Constitution* article, written by the renowned reporter Celestine Sibley, is striking in the ways it publicly positions Blair. First and foremost, Blair is the sole “studio representative”, a one-woman show acting on behalf of Disney (3). Blair’s autonomy, here, is certainly a reflection of her recognised talent as a researcher and concept artist sent “to collect historical and scenic background for the motion picture” (3). To support her research, Blair was afforded access to the “Uncle Remus library and scrapbooks” collected by Mr. and Mrs. Kurtz, as well as the Harris collection archived at Emory University and “the offices of *The Constitution* where [Harris] worked” (3). Further, Blair, who “described herself as delighted to be in ‘Uncle Remus country’”, is portrayed as nothing less than supportive of the adaptation, sharing that she was “‘brought up on Uncle Remus stories’ by her father” (3). There is nothing in this report suggesting the controversial nature of the film, nor does it situate Blair as in any way socially or racially conscientious in her quest to capture “real Georgia” (3).

One of the few to examine Blair’s participation in the film’s development, Holt reads the resulting concept art as possessing a certain “darkness” amid Blair’s colourful southern landscapes. “Instead of the pure, sanitized happiness described in the Uncle Remus stories,” Holt writes, “tragedy tinges the lives of African Americans in Mary’s scenes” (172). Any gestures Blair, inspired by her research, made to the harsh realities of plantation life, including depictions of “Uncle Remus express[ing] unmistakable sadness,” were eventually eliminated by the animators as they shaped their own narrative (172). The revisionism that Holt gestures to here is made even more explicit by Jason Sperb, who suggests that *Song of the South* was essentially forged by layers of incoherence: rewrites on a conservative script undertaken by a liberal Maurice Rapf suggest a “split personality”, while the film’s hybridity where “lighthearted, whimsical cartoons clash jarringly with the live action melodrama that depicts broken families, racial inequality, and children near death” is only further complicated by a rotating roster of animators (54–55).

But what is most intriguing about Holt’s account is how she repeatedly punctuates her discussions about the artist and race with speculation about Blair’s influence on and capabilities for inspiring course correction. In the case of *Song of the South*, she argues that while “Mary Blair’s sensitivity toward race in the segregated South shines through in her concept art for the film […] Mary could have tried to do more. At story meetings when racist depictions were discussed, she sat completely silent" (178). Holt cites an early work from Blair's fine art career as testament to her ability to depict sympathetically and earnestly the suffering of Black characters; however, she once again circles back to the empty promise of what could have been: "If Mary had brought this sense of humanity to the story meetings in addition to her *Song of the South* concept art", Holt asks, "might she have swayed Walt? We'll never know" (179). Holt later makes a similar speculative rhetorical move when discussing Blair's concept art of indigenous peoples for *Peter Pan* (1953). She rightly criticises Blair's oversimplification and homogenisation of tribal identities that set up the stereotypical depictions of indigenous peoples present in the film. Yet, once again, it is clear that Holt wishes Blair to be the interlocutor she ultimately was not: "Although Mary's art alone would not have rescued the film from its racial caricatures, which are a central feature of the original play and book and were soon made even more pronounced by the animators, her edification might have at least softened their crudeness" (216). Ultimately, Holt's approach poses questions about how we are supposed to reconcile Blair's successes and failures, as well as how much blame we are to place on the concept artist for the indiscretions of the final product.

Ultimately, it should be acknowledged that depictions of race are a complicated part of Blair's legacy. Writers on Blair—perhaps for the sake of locating in Blair the powerful combination of an otherwise-inspiring woman artist and Disney legend—have long attempted to overwrite or soften the blow of historical fact. Blair's position as a concept artist for films tainted by racism makes it impossible for her to be exonerated from the complicated legacies of films like *Song of the South* and *Peter Pan*. What Holt attempts to do is make clear the ways in which Blair, directly and complacently, participated in the recreation and dissemination of harmful stereotypes. However, there is more work to be done here, particularly in terms of the triangulation of women artists, race, and animation, as well as examining why it was that, even if only through her silence at production meetings, Blair became complicit in these racist depictions.

Challenges in Translation and the Championing of Mary Blair

In the years following the production of *Song of the South* and the subsequent Midwestern nostalgia film *So Dear to My Heart*, Blair helped bring to life the anthology films *Make Mine Music* (Jack Kinney, Clyde Geronimi, Hamilton Luske, Joshua Meador, and Robert Cormack, 1946), *Fun and Fancy Free* (Jack Kinney, Bill Roberts, Hamilton Luske, and William Morgan, 1947), *Melody Time* (Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, Hamilton Luske, and Jack Kinney, 1948), and *The Adventures of Ichabod and Mr. Toad* (Ben Sharpsteen, Jack Kinney, Clyde Geronimi, and James Algar, 1949). It was finally time, however, for Blair to produce concept art for three major animated features: *Cinderella, Alice in Wonderland,* and *Peter Pan*. *Cinderella*'s production was a test for the studio and a desperate Walt Disney: a box office and critical success on par with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (David Hand, 1937) was needed to improve the studio's finances. Walt Disney himself made it clear *Cinderella* should not stylistically mimic its predecessor: this was an opportunity for true innovation. Enter, then, Mary Blair.

Yet Blair's contributions to one of the studio's most iconic feature films are often minimised in accounts of her work, such as in the picture book *Pocket Full of Colors: The Magical World of Mary Blair, Disney Artist Extraordinaire*, written by Amy Guglielmo and Jacqueline Tourville and illustrated by Brigette Barrager, as well as Neal Gabler's 2006 biography of Walt

Disney. In *Pocket Full of Colors*, Blair's ideas for the film are largely written off as "too modern, too abstract, and just not right", arguing that the male animators' "black lines and strict rules" were grounds for Blair's later decision to leave the studio (Guglielmo and Tourville 25). It is one thing to oversimplify Blair's contributions to an audience of children, whom some authors eronously believe might not care about the details of Blair's artistic process. It is another to downplay her influence and the respect she received from Walt Disney and others, thereby suggesting she was not a confident or capable creative leader.

Worse, in writing for an adult audience, Gabler's descriptions of Blair, her contributions to the studio, and her relationship with Walt Disney are nothing short of reductive. What Katharina Boeckenhoff and Caroline Ruddell suggest in the context of the marginalisation of Lotte Reiniger, the German director and silhouette animator, applies as much to Blair: the repeated failure to take seriously not only the technical contributions but also the stylistic innovations of women in animation, especially when they have a large material presence in the archive, is troubling (Boeckenhoff and Ruddell 76). Gabler's underestimation of Blair fails to give her credit for her contributions to Disney animation. He fails even to list Blair as a member in his discussion of El Grupo and the Latin America trip. What is most concerning is the way that he reduces the artist to nothing short of a one-off "greeting-card" artist, rather than a true innovator. Consider Gabler's discussion of *Cinderella*'s "new, sharper, flatter, more minimalist style": "Walt was so determined that *Cinderella* not resemble *Snow White* visually that he asked *his onetime artist* Mary Blair to return to design the characters, which she did in a delicate, almost greeting-card fashion—against which, Ben Sharpsteen claimed, the animators rebelled" (460; emphasis added). It is not until later that Gabler indirectly clarifies his use of "greeting-card" style is indeed belittling. In his later discussion of *So Dear to My Heart*, he describes the film as "on its face a kitschy, syurpy, unimaginative one—*essentially a greeting card*" (Gabler 469; emphasis added). Gabler does not need to mention Blair by name for readers to associate her, however abstractly, with this project.

Blair, however, was highly respected by her peers, even if the animators on major features like *Cinderella* experienced difficulty in translating her designs to the screen. She was very much a recognised asset, as Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston (two of Disney's Nine Old Men, a lauded group of core male animators) put it in their tome *The Illusion of Life*, where they included her as a member of "our own staff" (191). As a stylist, Blair was one of those "artist[s] of unique ability" appointed by Walt to create concept art "that would excite everybody […] and create a way of visualizing the whole concept so that it would be attractive and fresh and establish an integrity of design for both characters and locales" (Thomas and Johnston 191). As Michael Barrier suggests, "Disney's enthusiasm for her work was thus the mirror image of the discomfort with abstraction that he so often voiced during work on *Fantasia*; Blair gave him a decorative abstraction that he could live with" (555).

The amount of care and expertise behind Blair's creative labour was undoubtedly recognizsd by her peers. But what made Blair's work so difficult to animate? According to Thomas and Johnston, "we all loved the crisp, fresh drawings of Mary Blair; and, since she always worked in flat colors with interesting shapes, it seemed that her work could be animated with wonderful results", but once animated by others at the studio, "Walt had decreed they often lost the spirit of her design" (Thomas and Johnston 192). Even then, the authors note that the process of at least trying to "move the drawings artistically" and translate Blair's design into this new medium and language, resulted in “some very interesting innovations” (192). Ken Anderson, another prolific Disney animator, lamented that any adjustments to Blair’s artwork during the animation process made the work no longer feel like hers and questioned whether these adaptations could ever result in “as wonderful a thing to look at” (Thomas and Johnston 192). It is clear, therefore, that Blair was greatly admired and respected, even if she posed a challenge to her colleagues. Even in cases like *Melody Time*, where the animators sought to preserve her strong backgrounds under Disney’s direction that her style be faithfully replicated, they were ultimately “so severely simplified that one can almost sense the animators running their hands over those smooth surfaces, trying to find something that will permit them to adapt Blair’s style to their own needs” (Barrier 555). In a 1982 interview, Anderson was able to more clearly state for the record why Blair’s style was simply unpractical for animation:

> We tried to follow Mary Blair many times, many times. And Walt used to be so annoyed at us because we couldn’t pull off what Mary had in these keys that she had made and because the animation didn’t seem to be the same decorative type of character that Mary had in her paintings. Besides, they couldn’t be quite as colorful, because there would be too much saturation of color for too long a period of time and people thought that it was hard on the eyes. (Ghez 65)

Because Blair is synonymous with her use of and experimentation with vibrant colours, this technical limitation is sensible. Underneath these restrictions also existed additional tensions between realism and whimsy, primitive and modern. While her character designs were sleek, Blair’s fanciful backgrounds clearly resonated with a carefully studied French decorative arts tradition established during the reign of Napoleon III (Burchard 73). Her whimsical, colourful backgrounds and costumes often “translated beautifully” to the screen, yet her character designs were ultimately replaced by the more animation-ready “familiar, rounded Disney house style”, one that better evoked “flesh-and-blood naturalism” (Canemaker, *Art* 44–45; Bashara 96). Though not every single one of Blair’s contributions were selected and adapted for the final film, many of her design elements were. A lack of total fidelity in translation should not signal failure on the part of the artist, nor should it detract from our appreciation and understanding of her range of influence.

Despite Disney’s longstanding artistic preference for realistic and believable characters and contexts in his animated films, he remained a champion of Blair (Pallant 35).[4] Writers who, unlike Gabler, make space for Blair stress not only the extent Disney trusted her creativity but also the ways he favoured her as an artist, lamenting when the final results made her contributions less visible. In Sharpsteen’s words, Walt “was extremely anxious to get something of Mary Blair’s natural talents into the character of *Cinderella* herself. Mary was given every opportunity to contribute in any way that she wished” (Ghez 65). Whenever animators failed to bring the full extent of Blair’s originality to the screen, Walt simply hoped for better next time. Canemaker might read this as only supporting Blair “up to a certain point”, but Disney and Blair were also part of a much larger machine, one driven by impersonal, practical, and technical limitations (Canemaker, *Art* 46). Thankfully, animation was not the only space where Blair’s artistry or Walt Disney’s support could be showcased. Outside of Blair’s successful freelance design career and the popularity of her Little Golden Books, Walt would call on Blair as he shifted his attention to mediums where she could exert and maintain more creative control (Canemaker, *Art* 72).

It's a Small World*:* The World as Blair Saw It

The ride It's a Small World was initially created for the New York World's Fair by WED Enterprises (later Walt Disney Imagineering) on behalf of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Following the end of the fair, the attraction soon became a staple at Disneyland in 1966, with another version soon delighting parkgoers in Fantasyland at Disney World's Magic Kingdom when it opened in 1971. In 2009, it was estimated that 6.7 million a year ride the Disneyland version alone (Chmielewsi).

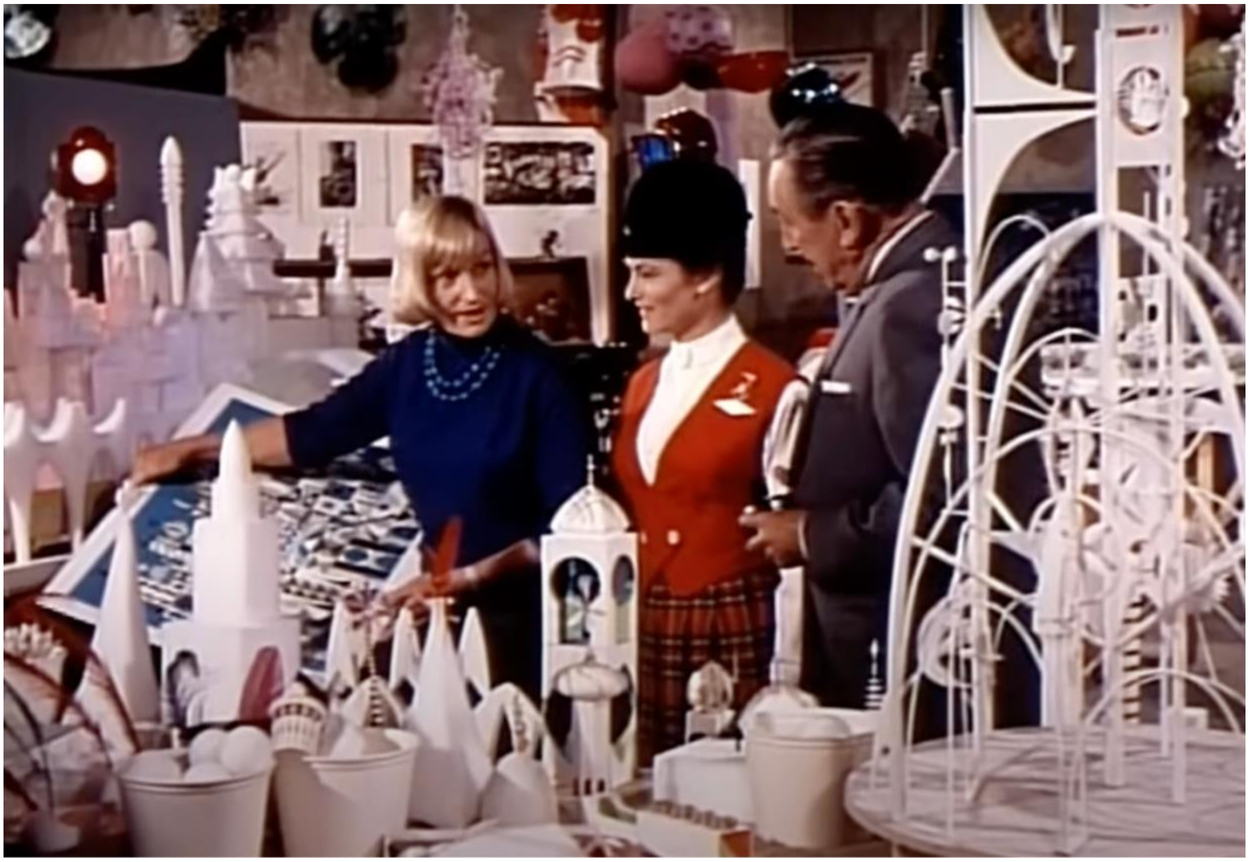

Figure 1: Mary Blair (left) discussing the design for the facade of It's a Small World during the "Disneyland 10th Anniversary Special" episode of *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color* (NBC, 1965). Screenshot.

Despite the number of employees required to bring the attraction to life, It's a Small World is widely considered to be Blair's most recognisable, and therefore iconic, project. Unlike films such as *Cinderella* or *Alice in Wonderland*, where her influence is only legible for those who know to look for it, it is through It's a Small World that Blair most directly continues to introduce herself to generations of new Disney enthusiasts. As part of the development work for *Saludos Amigos* and *The Three Caballeros*, Blair produced artwork of children that would later become the inspiration for the diverse cast of child characters (over 300 of them) developed for the ride. Disney knew Blair was the right artist for a job; according to Marty Sklar, during the project's conception Disney remembered the 1940s designs vividly and knew they needed her for the job (Canemaker, *Art* 84). It is also worth briefly noting that the last time Blair is mentioned in Gabler's account is in the context of the development of It's a Small World: "when [Disney] decided that the drawings of the dolls lacked a certain charm, he had them redesigned by Mary Blair, who had been a sketch artist at the studio in the 1940s, before moving east to draw greeting cards and illustrate children's books" (582–83). Once again, Gabler dismisses Blair, presenting her as a second-choice candidate; he undermines her importance as a concept artist and art director despite her enormous contributions to one of the Disney parks' most memorable attractions.

Of course, the production of a major attraction does not solely rest on the shoulders of one woman. Yet it remains the case, regardless of how Gabler frames this moment, that this was a momentous, career-defining opportunity for Blair. Designer and colleague Rolly Crump called the attraction Blair's "crescendo"; Canemaker described it as "a new pinnacle in her career" (Canemaker, *Art* 85, 87). Crump explains that It's a Small World presented Blair with a trifecta of creative opportunity: "it was about children, the freedom of color, and Walt asked her to do it. Like she'd died and gone to heaven […] I've never seen anything as powerful in her work" (Canemaker, *Art* 84). This is not to say Blair faced no translation difficulties from concept art to theme park ride; Canemaker, for instance, states "the final 3-D ride, while charming and fun, lacks the concentrated visual power of Blair's original designs; in them, her joy communicates in an emotionally dimensional way that is extraordinary" (*Art* 87). However, it should be clear that It's a Small World is very much hers. Even when the ride calls for renovation, imagineers are careful to consult Blair's designs, upholding to the greatest degree possible her intentions and the ride's integrity. This speaks to a profound respect for Blair, her character designs and collages, and her vision. In a 2009 article for the *Los Angeles Times,* Dawn Chmielewski testifies to the attraction's popularity but, most importantly, to how intentional imagineers must be to pull off such updates: "The challenge was to give the beloved attraction new vibrancy without altering the stylized look created by the Disney artist whose childlike illustrations influenced such classic animated films […] The Imagineers consulted illustrator Mary Blair's original drawings for illustration as they undertook the most ambitious updates of the ride since it opened at the Anaheim park in 1966" (Chmielewski). It's a Small World remains, after all, a doorway into Blair's colourful and creative world; more than entertainment, the ride serves as tangible encouragement to consider how women have made massive contributions to Disney's most famous films and attractions.

Conclusion: Looking for Mary Blair

Mary Blair is perhaps one of the most unique Disney Legends: a woman artist with a perceptible style operating in a period in which women were rarely differentiated or individually credited. Her story is indeed legendary, even if it has yet to be told fully. The touching final sentence of Canemaker's *The Art and Flair of Mary Blair* speaks to how influential Blair continues to be: "In every production, there's a phase where we say, 'Let's look at Mary Blair stuff!'" (101). The enthusiasm inherent in this statement is infectious: artists and readers alike are called to be inspired by Blair. Thankfully, there is much promising "Mary Blair stuff" to look at. We are only beginning to appreciate what she offered the world creatively. Much of this study and public revival has been initiated by historians focused on Disney; yet there remains much to be said about Blair's non-Disney projects, her professional networks, and her research and adaptation practices.

We should continue not to look just for Blair but also at the person behind her distinctive palette. Her professional success lay in her ability to embody colourful simplicity with a universal appeal, but despite her contributions to some of twentieth-century America's most beloved cultural productions, her life was far from perfect. The personal underwrites the artistic in ways that can shape future Blair studies. Blair passed away from a cerebral hemorrhage on 26 July 1978, following a bout with alcoholic dementia. She struggled with alcoholism and was a victim of domestic abuse.[5] Blair's private life was punctuated by grief and tragedy—experiences that greatly shape the production and reception of her art. To understand Blair's legacy in full, we must investigate further how her professional endeavors were complicated by addiction, domestic strife, and spousal competition. She was rocked personally and professionally by the death of Walt Disney, and her career waned as her abilities and health declined. By paying careful attention to the difficult personal contexts that informed her career, we can position Mary Blair within broader conversations about the complex legacies of creative women working in and around Hollywood during this period, as well as the relationship between art and trauma.

Notes

[1] See Linda Nochlin's foundational feminist essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", one of the first major works to begin unpacking how the reputations of women artists are authored.

[2] Frida Kahlo, perhaps the most famous or recognisable woman artist of all time, was not immune to this treatment, either (Hellman and Ross).

[3] A brief note about strike-era studio politics: as Ohmer summarises, the summer 1941 Disney animators' strike led to union recognition and served as a "visible reminder of the changes animation studios and staffers experienced during the studio era, as production processes became more complex and specialized and animation firms developed more elaborate organizational structures" (62). Kevin Sandler makes even more explicit that the strike "did much to alienate animators not just against a mode of production or division of labor but against an approach to animation: specifically, Disney's idea of what animation should be" (77).

[4] For a useful survey on animated realism, see Mihailova.

[5] This aspect of Blair's reality emerges most clearly in Holt's *The Queens of Animation*.

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Suggested Citation

Stecher, Gabrielle. “Examining the Legacy of Disney Artist Mary Blair.” *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 27, 2024, pp. 9–23. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.27.02

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