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The Golden Age of Illustration: Arthur Rackham & Kay Nielsen

The Golden Age of Illustration was a period from around 1850 to 1925 when illustrated books and magazines were extraordinarily popular (Early Levin). After the mid-nineteenth century, improvements in printing technology allowed for the mass-circulation of publications with illustrations (Unwin). There was a greater supply of low-cost pulp-based paper, and new processes to reproduce images that allowed artists more freedom in reproducing their artwork, such as half tone and line engraving (Early Levin). Publishers substituted leather binding with cloth binding, and began to sell books that were already bound as opposed to leaving this duty to the private buyer or bookseller (Unwin). The application of inventions such as stereotyping, steam power, and mechanical typesetting and typesetting lead to a revolution in book production in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Unwin). The labor saving improvements in printing technology allowed publishers to spend more for higher quality images from respectable artists, and the public grew to appreciate the works of illustrators such as Arthur Rackham and Kay Nielsen.

Arthur Rackham was well known as one of the leading illustrators during the Golden Age of Illustration. He lived from 1897 to 1939 and studied at the Lambeth School of Art. Rackham began his career as a journalist and illustrator for the *Westminster Budget* in 1892, and his first work as a book illustrator was in 1893 with Thomas Rhodes; "To the

Other Side” (Massey). Rackham was solidified as a respectable artist after his illustrations were published in William Heinemann’s 1905 publication of “Rip Van Winkle”, and JM Barrie’s “Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens” from 1906 (Massey). High-quality books with Rackham’s illustrations were often given as gifts for Christmas, with “*de luxe*” editions that were bound in vellum, printed in limited quantities, and occasionally signed, “quarto’ trade” editions that were larger and less elaborately bound, and “octavo” editions that were printed afterwards for only the most popular titles (Massey). Rackham’s illustrative process began with light pencil drawings that he would later trace over with pen and India ink, gradually erasing the pencil marks as the inked drawing took form. For his color pieces, Rackham slowly layered fine washes of watercolor to create dynamic illustrations. Since detail was often lost or compromised with the 3-color printing process commonly used at the time, Rackham re-inked his drawings after painting them to enhance clarity (Gettings). The results of his process are well-structured illustrations that are both carefully crafted and easily decipherable, due to the certainty of the line-work.

Another prominent artist during The Golden Age of Illustration was Kay Nielsen, a Danish-born illustrator, visual development artist, and art director. Nielsen was born in Copenhagen in 1886 and studied art in Paris at the Académie Julian and Académie Colarossi from 1904 to 1911 (Larkin). Nielsen grew up around the theater, and while he did not originally intend to become an artist, it is said that when he was younger he would draw the images that came to mind while listening to a story (Animation Resources). This imaginative endeavor seems to be prevalent even in his later work. His pieces mimic reality enough to evoke a sense of space and character, but his illustrations do not adhere to conventional ideas of perspective and dimension. The influence of Japanese woodblock

prints is also apparent in Nielsen's work. The whimsical, flattened spaces are carefully designed and well balanced. They are lush with ornate patterns, jewel-like colors, and elongated figures. His most popular illustrations were the watercolor pieces for Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's "In Powder and Crinoline" from 1913 and Gudrun Thorne-Thomen's "East of the Sun and West of the Moon" in 1914. For each book Nielsen created about 25 watercolor illustrations accompanied by over 15 monotone pieces (Larkin). There was a special richness of color and intensity to these works, as a 4-color printing process was used instead of the more common 3-color process. Nielsen's illustrative career waned with the beginning of the First World War, and he worked on theater production at the Theater Royal in Copenhagen (Larkin). While working with the theater in California in 1936 Nielsen was tempted by the artistic process of animation. After a personal recommendation, Nielsen found himself working with the Walt Disney Company. Because he had the tendency to work at a slower pace, Nielsen would create a scene with pastels in his signature style and other artists would create supplementary scenes replicating his style (Animation Resources). These images were then used as guidelines for the animators. Nielsen's designs were used for the "Ave Maria" and "Night on a Bald Mountain" segments of "Fantasia". Ultimately, the business and process of animation proved to be too taxing, and Nielsen was released from the Walt Disney Company in 1940 (Animation Resources). Nielsen's last few works of art were murals for churches and schools. He was supported by friends towards the end of his life, and died in poverty in 1957.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, there was no clear divide between popular art and fine art, and illustrators were considered to be fine artists (Early Levin). While photographs, rather than illustrations, would eventually dominate the realm of non-

fiction, during the Golden Age of Illustration illustrators enjoyed the ability to communicate with a mass-audience through news articles, advertisements, and books in publications such as *Harper's Monthly*, *Scribner's*, and *The Saturday Evening Post* (Malafronte). Public opinion of illustrators gradually fell as the use of advertising illustration grew in the early twentieth century and abstract art became the leading trend, undermining the representational nature of illustrations (Early Levin).

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