



MAGICAL AESTHETICS OF UNICORNS IN GIRLHOOD VISUAL CULTURE

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Abstract

Unicorns appear as enchanted and enchanting figures throughout fairy tales, popular media, fan art, and products, often intended or marketed for young girls. How can reading, viewing, and artmaking encounters with the mythical unicorn in artist books, which often appear in fairy tales authored by women, as well as in paintings, tapestries, illuminated letters, and films foster girls' imaginative power and empowerment fantasy? The authors' reflective inquiry about their community fairy tale arts workshop revealed elementary school girls' specific interest in a variety of unicorn imagery and characters from medieval art to contemporary television. Recognizing girls' interest in unicorn narratives, the authors, in this essay, explore how critical reading and the creation of art and stories about unicorns can teach girls to begin envisioning their agency through art. Specifically, their research asks: What gendered expectations and stereotypes about girlhood and womanhood may be embedded in a unicorn image? In what ways does the girls' fascination with unicorns also defy these stereotypes? Since a great deal of unicorn imagery can be traced back to Eurocentric books and visual culture, how can contemporary and counterculture versions of the unicorn revise whiteness and heteronormativity in visions of girlhood?

Keywords: imagination, power, girl, medieval art, visual culture

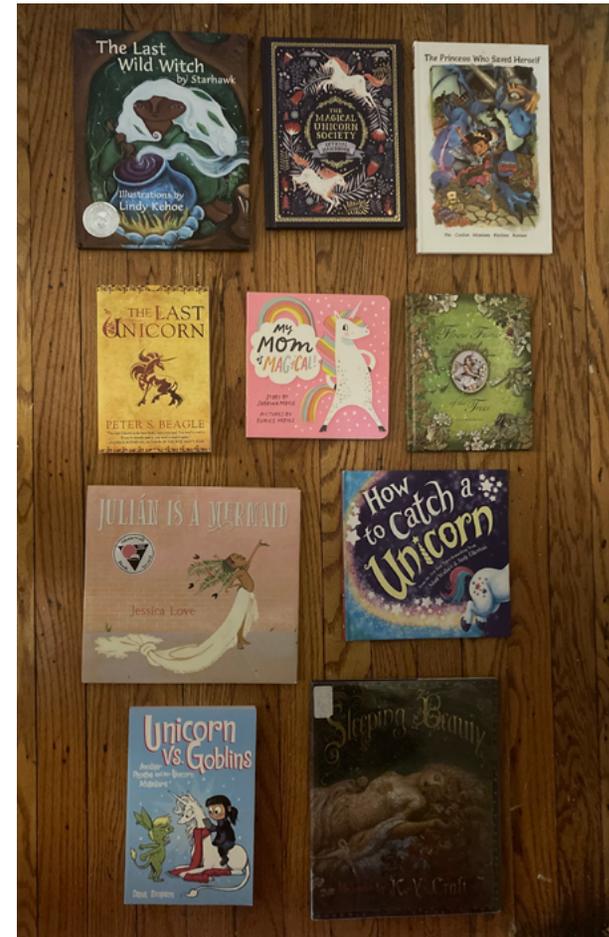


Figure 1. The photo shows a sampling of books that the authors set out for participants at their “Treasures and Tales” bookmaking workshop, as well as some additional books the workshop participants discussed. Students at the workshop used their phones and tablets to share additional imagery focusing on unicorns and other magical creatures from films and television shows that also influenced the work they produced.

Unicorns, Unique Yet Ubiquitous Magical Mentors, in Artist Books by Women

“I think I know something is magical when it has a lot of sparkles and is glowing . . . like a princess in a fairy tale or maybe like her unicorn”

(Attendee comment from a nine-year-old in a 2018 elementary school community workshop taught by the authors at Harvard University’s Ed Portal).

On a warm April Saturday morning, a nine-year-old girl lingers over a table cluttered with a collection of illustrated fairy tale books, photographs and diagrams of castles, brightly colored construction paper and metallic origami paper, fine tip markers, glue, glitter, scissors, and a smooth bone folder tool. Her mother smiles from the doorway, watching her crease, draw, cut, and glue her folded, sculptural accordion book in the shape of an undulating ornate castle. The girl has also drawn a unicorn family she glues onto this backdrop, dusted with glitter as well as delicately drawn stars indicating magical properties. Earlier in the workshop, she affixed small circles of paper to the back of gems (typically used in aquariums), some gems inscribed with flourishingly written words like *magic*, *wizard*, and again: *unicorn* and other gems illustrated with iconic symbols of these characters that illuminate more of her enchanted tale.

I realize that our workshop participant doesn’t want to stop creating her unicorn fairy tale, although we have reached the end of the workshop’s allotted time and her mother notes another commitment for which they cannot be late.¹ My co-leader and I gather extra materials for the children (all girls²) in the workshop,

to take home, reassuring the young artist she can continue her carefully crafted yet imaginatively adventuresome work. I wonder what magic she will create next as an artist and author of magic. My colleague, an art historian, and I created the workshop, at Harvard University’s Ed Portal, a collaborative community center,

¹ In this paper, “I” is used as the voice of the first author, and “we” is utilized to express shared views of both the authors.

² Given our focus on fairy tales and gender, we found it notable that all of our workshop participants were also female, although we had crafted the workshop as an exploration of “Treasures and Tales” in hopes of a broader appeal. However, the intimate size of the small group and the space enabled us to make careful observations of each of the students’ works.

to share our research and love of fairy tales and fairy tale illustrations with local elementary school children. Six female students, who appeared to be from White middle-class families and ranged in age from 8 to 11 years old, had signed up for the workshop. We hoped that the girls could locate themselves as part of a lineage of women as book artists, storytellers, and illustrators across the ages.³

Figure 2 provides foundational and comparative examples of unicorns in fairy tale characters and narratives from our study of art historical paintings, tapestries, illuminated lettering, and contemporary videos, which we introduced in the workshop, prior to showing the book art supplies we made available for the workshop participants to create their own fairy tales. In Figure 2, we identify several visual and conceptual topics that parents and educators might consider in viewings and educational and aesthetic discussions of unicorn-related media. The elements of relationships, mythologies, color symbolism, and art historical references in the chart are also intended for interdisciplinary analysis of other art and literature with youth.⁴ We explored with the workshop participants how various characters throughout unicorn media are visually and conceptually linked or contrasted with the symbol of the unicorn or unicorns.

³ Book artist Drucker (2007) also emphasizes the artist books of female creators as unique artistic genre in that they “make books out of the materials of their lives and imaginations . . . that give voice to their own issues on their own terms” (p. 14).

⁴ For example, in considering themes of gender and relationships, we noticed how in films such as *Legend* (1985), the unicorns are otherworldly and yet are parallel to the story’s female human heroine, Lily. The pair of unicorns could be seen as parallel with Lily and her betrothed, Jack, as all four are pursued by a devil-like evil force.

	<i>The Last Unicorn</i> (1982)	<i>My Little Pony</i> (2010-2019)	<i>The Unicorn Society Handbook</i> (2018)
1. Unicorn Relationships	The unicorn is initially alone in the world seeking others of her kind and instead befriends a magician and an elderly woman; she briefly takes the form of a human woman and is changed emotionally by this experience.	In a land of unicorns and other ponies, collaboration and community are emphasized; several female friendships between various personality and identity types are shared; and a same sex couple is introduced in the final season.	The unicorn is noted in relationship to other unicorns and in relationship to world cultures in general.
2. Unicorn Mythologies/ Roles of Magic	Magic is complexly defined - a witch enchants ordinary animals to appear as fantastic beasts for a profit; a talking skeleton acts as a profit/plot device to aid the unicorn; the unicorn transforms into a human female and back again.	Thematically the show focuses on the notion that the unicorn' and other ponies' "friendship [itself] is magic," and other magical/mythical creatures like minotaurs and dragons populate Equestria.	The magical powers attributed to the unicorn are noted as invisibility, flight, prophecy, and speed.
3. Unicorn Color Symbolism	Based upon a book of the same name, this film features a classic/traditional Western unicorn with a white body and golden horn.	In this long-running reboot of the 1980s television show, unicorns populate a diverse community of Equestria with ponies of many colors, ages, and interests. Some of the more central characters featured in consumer products are notably either white, pink, or purple.	The cover imagery of this book features white horses with golden horns and pink hair; a subsequent map of unicorns throughout the world and other imagery features various colors of mane and body; the mythology of the book focuses on the silver and gold unicorn.
4. Unicorns and References to Art History - Homage/ Satire	The film is anachronistic, with references to <i>The Unicorn Tapestries</i> in the opening credits, mentions of the New York City "A" train, as well as <i>Robin Hood</i> . The film has a diverse range of accents, rather than strictly British, as might be expected of the genre.	Place names in the show are slight variants on real places in the U.S. and around the world as well as a modified version of Camelot, in addition, art history resembling works like <i>American Gothic</i> are included, Weird Al Yankovic (who specializes in popular musical parody) was featured as a guest voice actor.	This book notes unicorn symbolism in art history from coats of arms, pottery, and sculpture.

Figure 2. Analysis of Female Unicorn Characterizations from Film, Television, and Books.

All of the imagery that the students in the two-hour Saturday workshop produced was very deliberately drawn and colored, with a reverent sense of making, almost as if students were inscribing a sacred text or creating runes (in reality, they were creating gem-like stones and golden books). The students consulted the fairy tale books we brought for reference, but also seemed interested in working from memory or imagination (referencing objects from films that represented magic or inventing a new variation or chimera of a magical creature they had seen or read about elsewhere). The girls depicted unicorns, most using sparkling stars and glitter, as an amalgamation of aesthetic influences from the resources we shared and their own imaginations. Their engagement with the topic of magic in general was deep and serious, with each student discussing the aesthetics of magical characters and enchantment they observed in the media of their lives (e.g., fairy lands, enchanted castles, witch schools), staying beyond the allotted two-hour workshop slot, creating more work than we expected could be produced in the workshop, and even in two cases, taking materials home to continue their projects.

Beyond their apparent enjoyment of the workshop, open-ended student evaluations of what they found interesting about the experience included reflections that they wanted to learn more about art history and crafts of the past, which further motivated our inquiry into the visual culture of unicorns and other magical creatures in girls' lives and artworks. There was an enduring preciousness to their work, perhaps suggested by treasure imagery in the project itself, as well of their sense of purpose in creating their own books they planned to read to siblings and friends.

We also wondered about what the nature of the unicorn's magic can be and how is it represented visually. Older students might consider if magic was used symbolically to represent difference, morality, or love. Psychologists have even observed the unicorn's plight sometimes symbolizes isolation and depression in the art of young people (Edwards, 2005), suggesting more possibilities for otherness and diversity.

Additionally, we wondered how young people could continue to explore the use of color of the unicorns encountered in art and popular culture, through interactions with other children, families, and educators. In terms of artistic color

symbolism in unicorn bodies and manes in the aforementioned literature and media, these animals are perhaps the most varied magical creatures in popular culture, with white, black, rainbow coloring, and other color combinations. This variety of appearance can mirror cultural and racial diversity and difference, at best suggesting greater representation in fairy tale settings.

Unicorn references from popular culture in student artwork during our workshop also demonstrate the engagement of youth with visual reference and remix, in response to unicorn-related shows, movies, and toys from sources such as the 2018 version of *My Little Pony*, which are reboots/remixes of the 1980s and today. In terms of homage, satire, or art historical reference points, students might also discuss inquiries such as: does the unicorn appear in a visually similar way to other images in art history or film? Does the unicorn acknowledge but somehow revise or poke fun at earlier references? *My Little Pony* media franchises inspire a great deal of creativity among fans across the lifespan, with unicorn costume/makeup and cosplay, generating what could be considered fashion and design curricula in social media fan groups.⁵

Art educators might introduce students to unicorns in medieval art aesthetics of riches, treasures, and precious objects through their landscapes and legends with golden pendants, glass baubles, and gemstone encrusted statues.⁶ Contemporary cartoon unicorns differ from medieval representation of unicorns in appearing in bright glittering colors, yet are no less precious in the visual narrative. For example, in the quirky 2017 film, *The Unicorn Store*, the main character Kit is an art school student whose paintings embrace a vibrant 1980s Lisa Frank⁷ aesthetic of rainbows, glitter, and unicorns. When she flunks out of art school and pursues work in an office, her various dilemmas between childhood and adulthood are brought to a crisis. The Unicorn Store appears as a sort of pop-up retail experience catered to her, with Samuel L. Jackson's character as a larger-than-life

⁵ For example: <https://www.deviantart.com/mlp-cosplays>

⁶ See Reinhold Vasters' pendant from 1980: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/207258>; James Houston's 1960 glass unicorn: <https://www.cmog.org/artwork/unicorn>

⁷ Lisa Frank is a designer of rainbow-hued, 1980s commercial art that adorned school supplies and was marketed to Western youth.

shopkeeper. Obtaining the unicorn is a possibility that seems just outside of her grasp as she decides whether to craft a homemade unicorn stable, or to create stability and purpose in her adult life at work and in relationships. Ultimately, it seems that perhaps someone else needs the unicorn more than Kit does. For us, the unicorn represents something akin to the journey from artist to art educator: that we can continue to love concepts and ideals from childhood but also need to shift our girlhood enchantment with unicorns to critically consider their magic, power, and meaning. By observing mothers and daughters during the workshop, we see how the unicorn can be a constant or even a guiding mentor. This symbol serves different needs as we age, both in and outside of the classroom. As a unifying device we can also use unicorns as points of understanding, linking, and strengthening the bond between educators and their students. It was this spirit of passing along gifts and possibilities of magical stories and creatures to young people that inspired this somewhat open-ended exploration, in which we trusted unicorns and young people to lead us to ideas and spaces we could not yet imagine as researchers.

Revising Gendered Expectations and Stereotypes about Girlhood and Womanhood Embedded in Unicorn Images

With our backgrounds in art education, literature, and art history, we wanted to share our passion for fairy tales and book arts through an open-ended presentation and arts activity session intended for local children. As children's literature theorist Trites (1997) proposed, we also hoped to help youth "revise gender stereotypes in fairy tales and to replace them with more complex versions" (p. 141). Inspired by our work in museums and art history classes, we utilized frameworks similar to Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine's *Visual Thinking Strategies* (2003), encouraging students to notice details about works of art, discuss them, and, in this case, to integrate elements such as color, symbol, or style into works of art and literature within artists' books they would later create.⁸

In collaboration with the Ed Portal staff, we gathered art supplies

⁸ Our studio approach was inspired by previous art teaching experiences with graduate students in book arts and literacy (Weida, 2015), arts research on visual culture of girlhood and treasure in collaboration with a photographer (Weida & Bradbury, 2013), and a related art curriculum project on treasure (Weida, Bradbury, & Weida, 2018).

mirroring many elementary art rooms such as paper, markers, and collage materials. We also created a visual presentation of a variety of art historical and contemporary imagery from fairy tales in art and film, especially works that included women and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), and prepared discussion points to help young people engage with visual culture inquiry and a studio-based activity.⁹ Our discussion strategy asks students to share magical imagery they have encountered. Initially, we had curated a large and diverse collection of images and fairy tales for our "Treasures and Tales" workshop that included many magical characters and creatures. However, our inclusion of other magical characters like wizards did not appear to be as impactful on the artistic choices of the girls participating in our Saturday workshop. Instead, we found that the girls who attended the workshop had an often singular focus on images and tales of unicorns.

Maxine Greene (2000) elevates children's artwork on unicorns and elves as "images of possibility" (p. 53), encouraging teachers to cultivate both perception *and* imagination. Inspired by our students' words and works during the workshop, my colleague and I have continued to examine some of the myriad meanings of the unicorn. We observed that while students were searching their phones for images of unicorns and drawing them, they were also talking to one another and to us about the unicorn aesthetically in terms of its rareness, wildness, magical qualities, all with a genuine love of their beauty or even cuteness. This range of visual meaning shows the unicorn's useful transgressions from medieval art history to fantasy illustration and fan art, bridging gaps between more serious and sanctioned spaces of art history and emerging commercial and/or outsider fan art and illustration. We also theorized that these young people were seamlessly embracing older traditions of hand-made book arts even while using the technology phones and tablets to find contemporary images of unicorns and other magical creatures to inspire their illustrations, suggesting an intertextual vision and connectedness of both enduring and contemporary artistic influences. In what follows, we discuss unicorn mythologies and symbolism further in the context of girlhood.

⁹ For example, *Islamic Sleeping Beauty* features characters and details from Anatolia, and *African Sleeping Beauty* centers on Princess Riva's life in her local community.

Unicorn Mythologies and Symbolism

Unicorns are beasts from Eastern as well as Western mythologies (Tagliatesta, 2007) featured in bronze statues of Ethiopia (Hunt, 2003), and are reflected throughout art history and the visual culture of fairy tales, film, memes, and mythology. Unicorns compellingly symbolize the creative imagination in art and literature (Wriglesworth, 2006), as a sort of blank canvas for the imagination (Elstain, 2005). They are so central in children's literature that a major journal on this topic is entitled *The Lion and the Unicorn* (often compounding challenges in researching unicorns as a subject area without merely locating citations to this journal). In theorizing incredibly vast visual and symbolic culture of unicorns, our shared sense of categorizing and defining them might be categorized as a form of *unicornhood*, a term mentioned around unicorn mythology in philosophical writings (e.g., Denby, 2008). Unicornhood, in art education, could encompass exploring kinship possibilities conveyed in terms such as neighborhood, sisterhood, childhood, and adulthood.

Looking across my own life, a thread of visual culture artifacts and memories of my youth include an array of unicorn-related visual culture from across genres, from the *Unicorn Tapestries* of medieval times to Tolkienesque unicorn paintings by the brothers Hildebrandt. I would later discover artist Betye Saar's subversive painting *To Catch a Unicorn* (1960) and appearances of unicorns in both a dream sequence of a unicorn and an origami unicorn in *Bladerunner* (1982). Beyond my enduring interest, I have found that elementary students today share a deep fascination with and preference for unicorns, as does my own preschool-aged daughter (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Author's daughter with various unicorn stuffed animals.

Unicorns and Girlhood

Unicorns throughout history trace a timeline of varied visual and historical references, perpetually connecting art history with other media. In our survey of medieval and medieval-inspired imagery of unicorns, including the *Unicorn Tapestries*, we identified a treasure-like aesthetic of antique gold jewelry and medieval landscapes dominate much of the imagery associated with unicorns. We also found an otherworldly, often futuristic quality of unicorn art with pastel pinks, glitter, and rainbows. Figure 4 shows our collection of unicorn imagery on a Pinterest board.

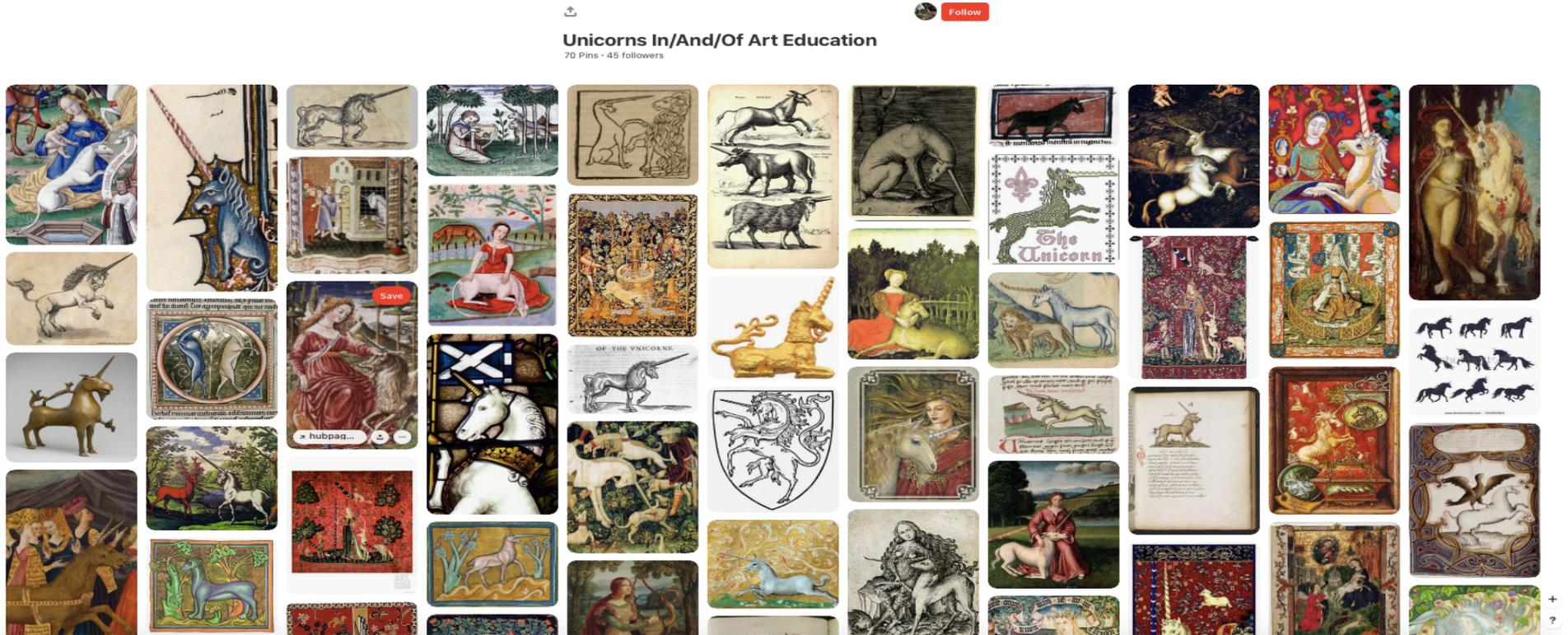


Figure 4. Screenshot of a Pinterest Board curated by the authors. See <https://www.pinterest.com/c0urtneylee/unicorns-inandof-art-education/>

Swindle (2011), who writes of the history of Eurocentric girlhood and her own daughter's views on this topic, has categorized unicorns as part of a comprehensive aesthetic and tantalizing hoard of "girlhood," including such items as:

Pink, glitter, rhinestones, dollhouses, dresses, joy, teddy bears, unicorns, flowers, bubble gum, long hair, fingernail polish, Barbie, American Girl, dolls, dress-up clothes, tiaras, bows, barrettes, tiny backpacks, posters of teen stars, rainbows, sassiness, lipgloss, hopscotch, funny, jumprope, cotton candy, princesses, giggles, tickles, gossip, girlfriends, crushes, diaries, secrets, magazines, notes, hula hoops, power, arts and crafts, bikes (with streamers of course), dancing, fashion, gummy bears, pop

music, wonder, high heels, intelligence, happiness. (para. 15)

Similarly, McVeigh (2000) observes the aesthetic of cuteness in Hello Kitty products, which often prominently include a unicorn companion. He contends that these products appeal to children as artifacts of girlhood associated with cuteness and coolness, and to women as a form of camp in Japanese culture and beyond.

As the unicorn appears variously in fairy tales, children's television, fantasy/science fiction films, and illustrations of and consumed by adolescents and adults, it is in and of itself a visual (and viral) study in many different contexts and forms over time. Both traditional and futuristic aesthetics appeared in children's art during the workshops as well, with golden-horned solemn steeds and playful pink ponies with purple horns. However, Lamb and Brown (2007) also describe how

unicorns can be markers of misguided marketing schemes. Specifically, they note how Latina character Dora of *Dora the Explorer* typically embodies intellect and athleticism in the Nick Junior show, yet she appears in products with incongruently flowing hair, glittering jewelry, and an inexplicable unicorn companion. The unicorn figures in many other unlikely products. For example, as a new mother in online community parent groups about babywearing, or carrying infants and young children in hand-made slings and wraps, I often noted virtual discussions about *unicorn* baby carriers. These unicorn carriers are made from rare and beautifully patterned cloth, sometimes featuring actual unicorns on the fabric.

Unicorns are also a subject throughout children's art, sometimes inspired by books about these creatures (Steele, 2014). By recognizing this tendency and extending students' passions with additional inquiry about what particular unicorns might do and say (and mean), art educators might engage students with art historical discussion and symbolic exploration.

Maria Elena Solino, (2002) a researcher of Spanish fairy tales, observes that despite sexist and racist content the Walt Disney studio is a main reference point of fairy tales for many young people. To begin to address these imbalances of representations around gender and culture in fairy tales, it is important to introduce lesser known fairy tales highlighting the heroism of a female protagonist such as in the 2017 film, *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*. This fairy tale is also included in a 2017 anthology of feminist folktales, noted by its editor, Ethel Phelps, as a tale of fearlessness and female adventure in contrast with passive princess plots of more well-known tales.

Lowenfeld and Brittain (1987) once observed the figure of the horse (common in so many female children's drawings) represents important qualities of escape and movement within the creative growth of young girls, as "a symbol of running, dashing freedom that is part of the joy of growing up" (p. 310). To us, the unicorn seemed a slightly more idealized or fantastic version of the horse, perhaps more common among younger girls than horses of the tween years.

More recently, Brown and Aber's 2014 study on boys' and girls' attitudes about one another's artwork revealed that unicorns are often seen as both girly and passive, yet unicorns are more often meant as symbols of movement and growth.

Additionally, a feminist graphic novel series that includes drawing activities, *Phoebe and Her Unicorn*, is noted by librarians as popular among *both* girls and boys (Widdersheim & McCleary, 2016). Meanwhile, many young and adult males called *bronies* are noted as devoted fans and remix artists of the unicorns of *My Little Pony*. Their art often underscores the inclusivity of the series in highlighting LGBTQ characters (Gilbert, 2015). All of this context suggests the representational possibilities posed by unicorns in media and artistic remix. We felt that our work during the workshop also engaged a sort of remix, as we provided students with many images from art history, film, and television that they collaged and crafted into their own imagery and narratives.

Underlying Unicorns: The Workshop

Our workshop goals included aiding students in exploring images and stories from fairy tales and then discussing and creating their own interpretations. Stemming from our research and feminist teaching approaches, we also presented works of art and media stills that included women as readers, writers, and illustrators of fairy tales (e.g., imagery of Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* reading her books, and paintings of magical settings and creatures by Remedios Varo). We asked participants to do the following:

1. Examine and create symbols to represent key story elements.
2. Inscribe flat glass "gems" with interesting and unique vocabulary to begin to plan their own fairy tales
3. Author and illustrate their own magical story on a golden accordion book they learned how to craft by hand.

Although we had access to a small materials budget from partners at the Ed Portal and were able to supplement this from our art teaching supply reserves (Figure 5), it may be noted that many of these projects could be completed on a lower budget or with more inexpensive materials and community donations such found rocks and school glue.



Figure 5. Harvard Ed Portal Workshop materials.

We introduced ourselves in the context of the workshop topics as teaching artists. My colleague introduced herself as a researcher who studies ancient paintings and books - often about princesses, dragons, knights, treasure, etc. I described myself as an artist who also teaches people about making things, like creating their own books and producing art about magical things they really love. We introduced the lesson as a special time to explore fairy tales the way people have for centuries, using spoken words and simple pictures or symbols to tell them with our voices, and them using books to record them, illustrate them more ornately or draw pictures to share with others in our own different ways.

We began our workshop with the discussion question: *What's your favorite fairy tale and why?* Students talked about several shows like *Sophia the First*, *Harry Potter* films, and animated classic Disney films based upon fairy tales. Their mention of fairy tales seemed limited to those they had encountered in related films (e.g., Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*). Expecting that Disney's version of *Sleeping Beauty* would be familiar to children, we brought in several fairy tale books depicting *Sleeping Beauty* from various cultures and the voices and visions of female authors and/or illustrators for students to look at while they began the studio portion of the workshop: drawing, painting, and writing (see Figure 5). The

books in Figure 6 are all illustrated by women artists, as our preliminary research on fairy tales had focused on gender and illustration (Weida & Bradbury, 2018), and on educational resources pertaining to feminism, fairy tales, and princesses (Weida, Bradbury & Weida 2019).

Illustrator	Publication date	Key Distinctions of Gender and Culture for Arts Education
Shireen Adams	2018	Islamic version
Carolyn Carter	1965	highly colorful 1960s-influenced
Emma Chichester Clark	2001	ballet adaptation
Kinuko Craft	2002	Baroque-inspired style
Francesca Cripsi	1991	ballet adaptation
Valerie DoCampo	2017	ballet-inspired
Maja Dusikova	2012	watercolor images and story adapted for younger readers
Mindy Dwyer	2014	Alaskan adaptation
Margaret Early	1993	historic French Loire Valley setting
Sarah Gibb	2015	ink and silhouettes
Linda Hill	1995	ballet-inspired
Rachel X. Hobreigh	2000	African <i>Sleeping Beauty</i> ; bilingual book
Carol Hyer	1996	prolific fairy tale artist/author
Trina Schart Hyman	1977	artist/author inspired by live models
Linnea Johansson	2015 https://jamstallt.se/docs/super-strong_princess.pdf	Guerrilla coloring book promoting gender equality and LGBTQ rights
Erin McGuire	2017	Vibrant illustrations of an elderly weaver
Ruth Sanderson	1996	detailed oil paintings
Christine San Jose	2016	features characters as mice, intended for young children

Figure 6. Appendix of *Sleeping Beauty* Representations by Women Illustrators and Key Features of Gender and Culture

Although our initial workshop focus was on fairy tales and princesses from our previous research on women illustrators and authors of *Sleeping Beauty*, we soon discovered that our workshop participants had other interests with regards to magic and enchanted characters. Just as we went in divergent directions around problems and possibilities of Princess Aurora in our research, the students explored different ideas and interests than we anticipated. Our group of female attendees frequently expressed interest in the theme of magic in varied ways that showed what we came to believe was a sort of developmental graduation from preschool princess fixations and a shift toward more tween/teen-friendly representations of wizards, witches, fairies, and especially unicorns. We interpreted the unicorn as an enduring focus for the girls in our workshop. As the following sections outline, unicorns appeared frequently in their fairy tale gems and golden books.

Fairy Gems: Symbols

Our first activity began with a discussion of major symbols or pictures we might need to tell a good fairy tale story. We included vocabulary questions to aid in comprehension and in planning imagery to be used:

1. What is a symbol?
2. What are persons, places and things in a fairy tale?

Answers provided by the students included castles, dragons, princesses, crowns, treasure, and especially unicorns. By way of art historical reference, we had included some PowerPoint slides on unicorns and maidens from *The Unicorn Tapestries*, which may have influenced this symbol choice.

We invited students to practice both the writing of words and the sketching/drawing their unicorns and other symbols on very small on templates and scrap paper before creating the final version to glue on their gems. This process was an exciting visual challenge, for the small drawing would be magnified by the glass stone, almost as if seen through a crystal ball or through water. We located both plain sealant and sealant that contained glitter provided by the center that hosted us, which many students chose to use to make their stones appear more glittery and “magical.”

Fairy Gems: Words

Once students had created several symbols, we invited them to also explore lettering and vocabulary to create gems with words. We asked students to consider: *what are some of the most useful words to use to tell a fairy tale or fable? What are some words you hear a lot in fairy tales - that you need to tell a memorable fairy tale?* Answers prominently included unicorns, witches, magical stars, and fairies. We also asked students to be creative and innovative, posing the questions: *What are some words you would add that no other storyteller has used before?* We showed imagery of illuminated letters from medieval manuscripts to inspire students to consider typography, color, and style as they created their word gems. Students again practiced before creating their final gems. We encouraged students to think about when and how they might use these special gems. Answers included sleepovers with friends, recess at school, and sharing with families.

Golden Accordion Storybooks

Although many students chose to create several additional symbol and story gems past the amount of time we expected them to work on these projects, we were also able to allot some of this singular workshop’s time for the creation of accordion books. This versatile form of book unfolds pages in a pleated fashion, like an accordion, often with text and/or imagery. To inspire students’ books, we made explicit reference to the images of fairy tale texts we had brought as well as reference to those characters the girls mentioned or created. We hoped to meet them where their interests were, and to see what they noticed about fairy tale imagery. We included accordion book tutorials as handouts so students could also make more at home. Our demonstration modeled the use of a bone folder to create very precise and smooth creases and folds, and to have students engage with professional book arts tools. We demonstrated the use of cut-outs to draw and cut roofs, towers, doors, windows, and other structures to suggest a castle or other building as a sort of backdrop formed by the book for the story they would ultimately create. We invited students to research, discuss, and create characters they might include on their accordion books (e.g. dragons, princesses, treasure, knights). Students both collaged and drew characters on their papers. Students notably also drew very minute and stylized stars and starbursts around their unicorns to suggest a rich atmosphere of magical glowing and glittering.

Unfolding Unicorn Universes: Concluding Reflections

In our observations, unicorns endure, often as complex, storied symbols of freedom, magic, and girlhood identities. As Babić and Vekić (2018) provocatively observe, the unicorn also signifies “something that does not exist in the real world, unreal and fantastical” (p. 163). Although sometimes imperiled and precious, unicorns are also warriors often pitted against lions (Suhr, 1964). This thread of peril can be somewhat familiar to those of us advocating for any underserved or unappreciated element of art education, such as the recognition of unicorn illustrations from fan art and popular culture alongside medieval paintings and tapestries on this subject. A sense of mystery and fascination with aesthetics, art history, and remix is a useful jumping off point for curricula that reflects and honors the interests and longings of many young people. The noble unicorn has also been noted as purifying and curing of afflictions (Cole et al, 1989). During troubled times in art education, the positivity and provocative nature of unicorns can evoke health and healing along with their enduring beauty, creativity, and magical qualities.

Though our workshop was limited in scope and timeframe, it suggests that unicorn art and youth culture is a vast area of interest for art educators and students to explore further and with both humor and seriousness of purpose. While unicorns can be presumed as symbols of whiteness and/or White girlhood in some mainstream popular media mentioned in this paper, they also figure as symbols of otherness, including representations of artists, people of color, and LGBTQ+ individuals and groups through fan art, remix, and cult media representations. Unicorns can be diverse and enduringly powerful visual symbols of girlhood culture which, despite their endurance across generations, have not been fully recognized in our field. From our experiences teaching and researching this topic, we have discovered several ways in which unicorn art, at its best is capable of making meaningful leaps across genders, genres, and generations in art education.

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