

Where the Lorax Lives... and Other Secrets of Dr. Seuss

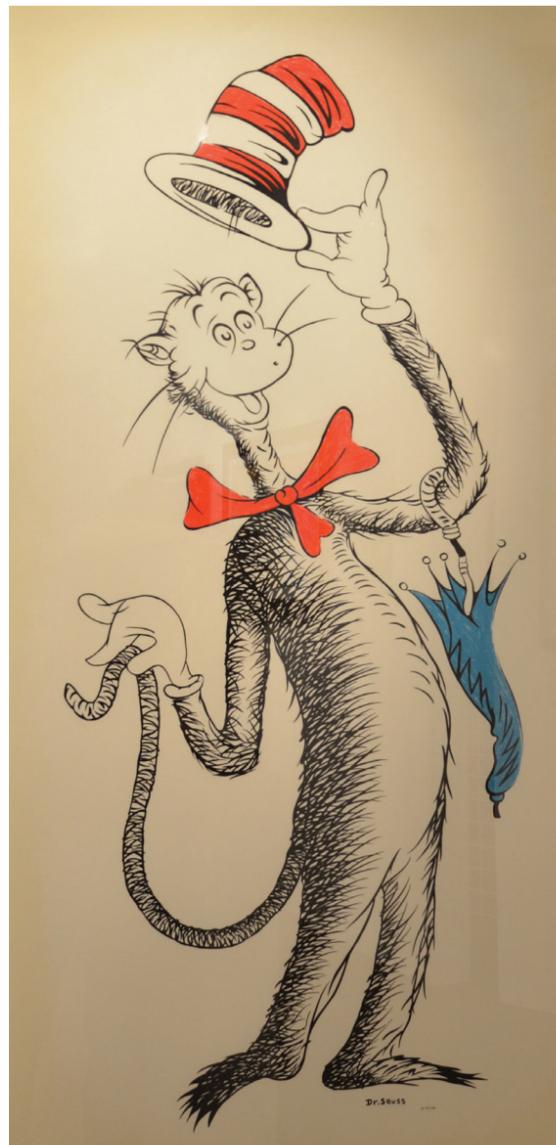
A home to many secrets and stories passed down through generations, Austin still shares these oral histories via natives who continue to gather around dinner tables and environmentally friendly chair circles on dank summer evenings in a neighbor's backyard. Many people have a ghost story from the Driskill Hotel, a wistful memory about the first time they saw bats fly out from under the Congress Street bridge or a tale/opinion about the California invasion of 2008. And then you hear the one about the Lorax.

Yes. A Lorax lives in Austin, still speaking for the trees and hopefully preventing any excessive Thneed* production.

As one of the country's notable "green cities," Austin does its part to provide greenbelts, lakes, hike-and-bike trails and plenty of trees for its inhabitants. With just over 190,000 acres in Austin's city limits, the city owns about 16.8 percent of that land and dedicates it to parks and preservation. That's why it's easy to imagine Austin is where the Lorax was lifted to when he departed the "town where the Grickle-grass grows" in Dr. Seuss' 1971 children's book *The Lorax*.

You don't have to imagine it. The Lorax has been abiding in Austin

since 1970 when Liz Carpenter, Lady Bird Johnson's press secretary, was able to help secure a donation from Theodor Seuss Geisel to the LBJ Presidential Library and Museum set to open in May 1971 after chatting with him over dinner. As



the story goes, Carpenter called President Johnson and suggested that he merely ask for a donation. Instead, LBJ asked for the phone and launched into a commanding declaration, thanking Geisel for his donation. Geisel politely said, "You're welcome," and donated around 80 original pieces of artwork from *The Lorax*. The library still showcases the artwork on a limited basis, and another dinner table story was born.

Yet another secret that may tempt you might be Geisel's secret works of art he never released. It was Geisel's request to his wife, Audrey, to retain the artwork and not release it until after his death. His art was precious to him, and he feared it would be panned by critics since many already knew him as Dr. Seuss, children's storybook author, by the time many of his "secret works" were created.

Geisel's secret can be viewed in all its glory in "The Secret Art of Dr. Seuss" collection at ART on 5th in downtown Austin. The 6,000-square-foot gallery boasts the largest collection of Dr. Seuss art in the country, and is the only Austin gallery chosen to exclusively represent his art. ART on 5th features a permanent exhibit of Dr. Seuss' sculpture, archival works, illustration art and "secret art" reproductions for sale, including limited editions, as well as other artists and touring exhibits from around the world.

The permanent Dr. Seuss exhibit at ART on 5th begins in chronological order and takes the spectator on a journey from his college years at Dartmouth and his early jobs as an ad man during the Depression Era – using his art to make ends meet – through his "experimental taxidermy" phase, on to more political and commercial works and into his iconic characters in the children's books he wrote. Upon viewing the full scope of the work and perspective of what his publisher at Random House called a true genius, one might not suspect that Geisel was once voted "Least Likely to Succeed" in college. What was at once a means to make a living, his imaginative art manifested into our childhood memories as the national treasure we know as Dr. Seuss.

"These artworks are the windows to the world of this unassuming genius, Dr. Seuss," said William Dreyer, curator and director for the Art of Dr. Seuss collection in Chicago. Dreyer became passionate about the secret art of Dr. Seuss during a visit to an early exhibition in New York. From then, he was completely hooked and positioned to be the person to present Dr. Seuss' artistic legacy.

"It inspires people to come up with their own wacky vision of the world," Dreyer said.

Most people are excited and surprised when they find out about his other art



– advertising, "experimental" taxidermy, sculpture, adult cartoons and his classic art on canvas – all in addition to the classic children's books that generations since the Baby Boomers have grown up reading. Claire Sudolsky, ART on 5th gallery consultant, commented on Dr. Seuss' artistic style and how it can be compared as a major piece of work in its own right, aside from the books.

"You can look at them with an art historical, a sort of scholarly, perspective," Sudolsky said. She went on to note that in some of Dr. Seuss' pieces you can see his influences in abstract expressionism.

"Frequently, you'll see geometric patterns kind of get played out, which is completely different from abstract expressionism, which is very flat and very based in color and shape," Sudolsky said, referring to the piece *The Joyous Leaping of Uncanned Salmon*. "You can see that in others where the repetition of shape is really powerful overall," she said, referring to a piece entitled *Lion Stroll*.

Sudolsky noted that while one could entertain a discussion of high-brow art aesthetics, what is important is that on a broad scale Dr. Seuss connected with so many people. "At the end of the day, they're really fun and people connect with them without having to know all of this."

"Seuss is kind of a social sponge where he takes what's going on and then reflects back his version of it; his version of abstraction, his version of cubism, etc.," Dreyer said.

ART on 5th hosted a special event on March 2 to introduce a few new pieces of the Secret Art Collection and to celebrate the late Geisel's 108th birthday. Dreyer gave a special presentation that introduced the new releases, and art collectors got a first look at a couple of notable pieces: *Green Cat with Lights* (1970s) and *Incidental Music for a New Year's Eve Party* (1932). *Green Cat with Lights* is a whirl of greens and yellows using mixed-media pigment print on canvas. Part of the "Big Cat" series, Geisel signed the painting "Stroogo Von M" as a prank but also as a way to elicit honest opinions from guests when the art was displayed in his private home.

"The imagery stretches well beyond preconceived notions, and in every way Dr. Seuss delivers a ton of visual stunners dense with ideas," Dreyer said.



Originally published in 1932 as a black and white center-spread in Judge magazine, Incidental Music for a New Year's Eve Party has been brought to life with vibrant color to underscore the lively depiction of merry-making musicians. Creative in both word and form, Geisel's medium was all over the map: oil on board, mixed media and sculpture originals that used real feathers, beaks and horns. All art reproductions can be purchased at the gallery as serigraph on canvas.

ART on 5th hosts the largest retrospective of these artifacts ever made available in the country, and the good fortune to view them has been granted by Audrey Geisel, who released the rights for the artwork to be reproduced over time. Since 1997, four to six pieces are released from the secret collection each year. Aside from the originals in the LBJ Museum, Audrey houses many originals in her home, while roughly 7,500 drawings and other originals are archived at the University of California at San Diego's Mandeville Special Collections Library.

From his hilltop studio in La Jolla, Calif., Geisel created some of his most beloved characters. A tall, wiry prankster

himself, Geisel's alter egos of the Cat in the Hat and the Grinch came to life on the page, compelling his art to reflect his life.

"Artistically, they embody this really magical combination of the person and the persona – Dr. Seuss and Theodor Seuss Geisel," Dreyer noted.

For instance, when Geisel was 53 years old, he woke up on Christmas morning and stared at his grumpy face in a mirror and pondered why he had a sour mood on such a festive day. It was then he realized his dissatisfaction with the commercialization of the holiday, and so the story of the Grinch was born.

"Why, for fifty-three years I've put up with it now!" the Grinch exclaims in the 1957 classic *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*

"The funny thing about Ted Geisel is you never knew what was true and what was made up. And that's such the case with many of his stories," Dreyer said. He was such an inventor, not just of characters but of words as well.

"I think the creatures he comes up with are part of the ingenuity that people love about him. This clever creativity is part of everything he does. And that's embodied so often with these characters – the Lorax, the Grinch – he made up words because if he couldn't find one, he'd just make one up," Dreyer reflected.

Some of the more interesting Dr. Seuss works in the exhibit at ART on 5th are reminiscent of other familiar artists, like Ansel Adams or Salvador Dali, while others are clearly inspired from the art deco period. Besides one provocative piece with a character that strangely resembles Adolf Hitler, many political pieces of art and literature that Geisel put his name on during the early 1940s are on display. During 1941-43, he created more than 400 editorial cartoons for New York's PM Daily newspaper regarding politics and societal observations of the day. Only one piece has been released from his political collection, *The Knotty Problem of Capitol Hill*, *Finding a Way to Raise Taxes Without Losing a Single Vote*, which shows Uncle Sam watching congressmen debating how to raise taxes without losing votes. The humor transcends time the way his children's humor transcends generations.

"I think that's what's so universal about Dr. Seuss' work. In many ways it works on so many different levels. One to the children and one to the adults, and yet everything he does engages people of all ages," Dreyer said.

As Dr. Seuss, Geisel taught generations of children that it's fine to be different, and even better to do good, but there always should be some fun with it. One day his biographers would say that in the end,

Geisel was driven to be useful to the world and used his creatively drawn underdog characters and heroes as messengers to fight against real life struggles like literacy, arms responsibility, greed, conformity and environmental consciousness. But it was Geisel who may have said it most eloquently himself: "Children want the same things that we want: to laugh, to be entertained, to be challenged and delighted.



Dr. Seuss once said, "I don't write for children; I write for people."

Dreyer hopes art and Dr. Seuss enthusiasts can obtain a deeper level of understanding in many of his artworks. Geisel wanted his art to speak to all people, ages, races and faiths. While he wasn't a publicly religious man, he wrote a poem that accompanied an artwork called "A Prayer for a Child" in 1955, which ran on a full page in Colliers magazine. The soft blue picture vividly depicts a little house sitting on a big world within a bigger space of orbiting stars and planets. The pure components of the work – the simple house in its own space against the bigger worlds – most accurately reflect the mind of a child where he innocently thinks "this is my place on earth and it's the only thing that matters." However, the accompanying poem could be just as mature as it is simple and childlike.

A PRAYER FOR A CHILD

*From here on earth,
From my small place
I ask of You
Way out in space
Please tell all men
In every land
What You and I
Both understand.*

*Please tell all men
That Peace is Good
That's all
That need be understood
In every world*

In Your great sky.

*(We understand
Both You and I.)
By Dr. Seuss*