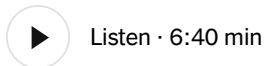


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## Pittsburgh's Children's Museum Satisfies a Hunger for Eric Carle

The institution will feature five of the beloved author's collage-based books in a series of interactive exhibits meant to engage children.



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**By Shivani Vora**

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This article is part of our Museums special section about how institutions are commemorating the past as they move into the future.

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Generations have watched him inch across the pages of a children's book, nibbling through fruit, cake and ice cream before metamorphosing from a caterpillar into a flying creature with colorful wings. "He was a beautiful butterfly," the book's final line reads.

Now that journey, familiar to so many children and their parents, comes to life in "Very Eric Carle: A Very Hungry, Quiet, Lonely, Clumsy, Busy Exhibit," an immersive, interactive installation returning this spring to the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, where it debuted in June 2015. The show will open on May 23 and run through Sept. 6.

The museum’s executive director, Jane Werner, who helped conceive the original exhibition, said the show had traveled widely in the decade since its debut, appearing in 19 states and 27 venues and been seen by more than two million visitors.

Eric Carle’s quintet of “Very” books — “The Very Hungry Caterpillar,” “The Very Quiet Cricket,” “The Very Lonely Firefly,” “The Very Clumsy Click Beetle” and “The Very Busy Spider” — teach children not only early learning concepts like counting and sizes, but also moral principles like patience and empathy. Drawing from the books, the exhibition invites museumgoers to step inside the author and illustrator’s nature-filled worlds through hands-on environments and art-making inspired by his distinctive collage techniques.



Preschoolers from Pittsburgh Public Schools hiding in and weaving through a field of four-foot-tall blades of grass in “The Very Clumsy Click Beetle” section of “Very Eric Carle.” Ross Mantle for The New York Times

How it came to fruition may be as endearing as the show itself. Werner said that she was familiar with Carle's work from reading his books to her own two children when they were toddlers and had admired him ever since. When she was appointed the museum's executive director in 1999, after eight years as its director of exhibits, the executive committee decided to present Carle with the Great Friend of Children Award, honoring individuals who have had a positive impact on children's lives.

"Fred Rogers, who lived in Pittsburgh, was a good friend of the museum's and also a good friend of Eric's, so we asked him to make the connection and to present the award," Werner said, referring to the children's television personality and educator known as Mister Rogers. "He did both, and that started a lifelong friendship between the three of us."

Werner and Carle, who died in 2021 at 91, kept in touch regularly over the years and discussed collaborating on an exhibition about his books. Other commitments delayed their plan for more than 15 years. Werner was overseeing the museum's expansion while Carle was occupied with establishing the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst, Mass., which opened in November 2002.

"We just didn't get around to working on the exhibit in earnest until 2014," Werner said. "Our idea was to share messages from the books and to teach the process of how the art in them was created by having kids try it themselves."

Now, in its second turn at the Pittsburgh museum, the show will occupy around 2,000 square feet in the traveling gallery, where visitors can follow the caterpillar's path, weave alongside the busy spider and experiment with Carle's signature collage process.

Anne Fullenkamp, the museum's senior director of creative experiences, who helped design "Very Eric Carle" and now oversees its travel and return, said visitors will see Carle's artwork throughout, with each of the "Very" books presented as a large-scale experience. Children can feel as if they are entering the books and encountering the stories from the perspective of the featured characters.

While Carle's books may appear simple, they are often layered with themes of loneliness, belonging and persistence. "The Very Hungry Caterpillar," for example, explores hope, reassurance and transformation. Fullenkamp said that when designing activities centered on such abstract ideas, she aims to make them tangible and relatable. "We wanted to create a setting where kids and their adults can practice skills and have meaningful conversations," she said. "Our approach for this exhibit was to identify the singular trait of each 'Very' story and use the images and words to recreate the setting."

In "The Very Hungry Caterpillar," the caterpillar — the exhibition's star and the first character visitors encounter — leads children through the book's pages one by one as they navigate through heavy-duty fabric panels, creating a tunnel-like passage. They emerge at a butterfly shadow-theater activity where they can design butterfly wings using colors and shapes inspired by the artist's paper-collage style.

"The Very Quiet Cricket" turns the gallery into a miniature orchestra. Children can touch a floor-to-ceiling wall mural of the cricket and its insect friends to create a musical composition of rhythms and insect sounds from nature.

Next comes "The Very Lonely Firefly," where visitors are invited to move their hands and bodies before an interactive video to lure a firefly toward their glow. "When kids are in front of the video and work with others, multiple fireflies come together to form a group, reinforcing the theme of friendship that is presented in the book," Fullenkamp said.

At "The Very Busy Spider," a weaving wall made of powder-coated fencing material has children threading materials, such as colored fabrics, through mesh panels embedded with images from the "Very" books. Nearby, three-dimensional puzzles let them piece together the exhibition's five insect characters. Fullenkamp said the activities speak to the theme of working hard for "beautiful results."

The show concludes with "The Very Clumsy Click Beetle," where the space becomes a playscape. Children can mimic the insect as they test their balance on a giant pile of pebbles and a poppy flower. They can also hide in and weave through a

field of four foot-tall grass blades. These activities echo the story's message of perseverance.

An art studio will sit at the center of the gallery. Fullenkamp said the space was designed to allow visitors to experiment with Carle's collage techniques. Children and adults can work with colorful materials, including painted rice paper, tissue paper and magazine images, cutting and assembling them with glue sticks and building their own artwork. Stamps, markers and colored pencils can add personal flourishes.

Fullenkamp said the show will introduce Carle's work to some visitors while offering longtime readers a renewed appreciation for his stories. "Today, we have potentially four generations who know 'The Very Hungry Caterpillar,' so it is exciting to think about how our exhibit can be both an introduction and a reunion," she said.

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