

MARY BLAIR

Preliminary design collage,
It's a Small World, 1964.
postcard, 4 x 6 in



courtesy: Walt Disney Family Foundation copyright Disney Company

ALLAN LANGDALE

The Not-So-Small World of Mary Blair Female Animator in a World of Mice and Men

There's a black-and-white photograph, taken in the mid-1960s, of a group of people who were the principal animators for Walt Disney at the height of the expansion of Disney World. At the center of the otherwise-all-male team is a diminutive blonde woman in a confident pose: Mary Blair, one of Disney's most prolific and talented illustrators. Blair received her training in the early 1930s at the prestigious Chouinard School of Art in Los Angeles, under the tutelage of artists such as Pruett Carter, who was an illustrator for *McCall's*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, and other popular magazines. She was the wife of another accomplished Disney animator, Lee Blair, who eventually left Disney to start his own design and marketing company, to which Mary contributed in later years. Long before it was fashionable to do so, Mary Blair juggled a high-pressure career while raising two children. She produced a huge body of work in myriad techniques: collage, watercolor, gouache, mosaic, oil, and even ceramic tile murals. Her output was so impressive and her legacy so durable that in 2011 she was accorded a decidedly contemporary kind of honor: Google designed a masthead—a "Google Doodle"—in Mary Blair style, celebrating her 100th birthday.

When you look at her work, there's something preternaturally familiar about it. For those of an older generation, there are the memories of backgrounds, settings, and costumes in the Disney classics of the Golden Years: *Song of the South* (1946), *Cinderella* (1950), *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), and *Peter Pan* (1953). But younger people might perceive these films as forerunners of the super-cute world of *manga* and *anime* Japanese comic illustration, whose huge-eyed figures owe much to Blair. Japanese animation artists, such as Osamu Tezuka, the "Godfather of Anime," were impacted by Disney classics such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Bambi*—Tezuka did a Japanese *anime* version of the latter. These and other Disney works, including those produced by Blair, were disseminated worldwide by Animated Disney Films.

Versions of Blair's children with circular heads, also intoxicatingly cute (though she may have gone overboard with the giant-headed tots of *Baby Ballet* in 1941), found their way into five Golden Books children's stories in the 1950s and 1960s. One, Ruth Krauss's *I Can Fly*, is still in print. In 1960, Jacqueline Kennedy sent a letter to Blair



Mary Blair reviews concept drawings for *Cinderella*.