

## EYVIND EARLE

*Big Sur Poem*, 1975  
Oil on canvas, 28 x 22 in



COURTESY GALLERY 21

## CHRISTINA WATERS

# The Sorcerer's Apprentice

The Magic Eye  
of Eyvind Earle

**T**hroughout his long career, Eyvind Earle conjured worlds at once mysterious and perfect. The painter's vocabulary of enchantment could easily be called surrealist. But the term *magic realism* might come closer. In Earle's work, primal nature and unexpected fantasy conspire to create a tension between subject and visual style. For example, Earle's groves of trees are clearly collections of living tissue and botanical energy, yet are charged with fantastical perspectives, whispering of supernatural forces and impossible growth patterns. Floral vistas unfurl in uncanny colors, against skies of mauve and prairies of turquoise. Hypernatural color choices propel his subjects into a magic ecology far beyond the everyday world. And it is this "beyond," this landscape of dreams, that makes Earle's visions so indelible. Those same visions lend magic to his Disney animations and to his later vistas of the California coast. Earle's work soared beyond the conventional in almost every way, from forms pushed to dazzling impossibilities to colors that might only exist on distant stars. Ablaze with supersaturated color and lyrical form, Earle's twentieth-century artwork defies easy categorization.

### The Castle

Once upon a time, when I was a little girl living in Germany, my family visited Neuschwanstein Castle, a froth of nineteenth-century architectural excess built by King Ludwig II of Bavaria (the patron of opera composer Richard Wagner) and set high above an alpine lake. With its spun-sugar turrets and towers, this fairy-tale castle loomed large in my girlhood imagination. Walt Disney animator Eyvind Earle must have had this opulent neorococo structure in mind when he began imagining an appropriate castle for the animated classic *Sleeping Beauty*. Perched at the very crest of a densely forested mountain, Neuschwanstein Castle offers an imposing spectacle of grand portals, crenellated towers, hundreds of Italianate baroque windows, and steeply pitched roofs crowned by pointed domes. The castle is approached by a steep and winding road, and once seen, is never forgotten. Certainly it was never forgotten by the twelve-year-old girl upon whom it made such an impression.

## Animating Make-Believe

Eyvind Earle was the lead stylist on the Disney film project *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), which meant he was responsible for creating the color schemes and the style of the artwork that would give the now-classic fairy tale film its unique look.

Earle's visual strategies inflected every frame of the film. Every vertical is elongated to heighten the drama. Towers don't simply rise, they soar. Turrets stretch to the sky and every roofline becomes a pointed exclamation, defying mere ordinariness. Earle's work grew out of modernist as well as art deco tropes of the early- and mid-twentieth century. The strong, clean poetry of Georgia O'Keeffe's American landscape haunts much of his work. The robust inventions of Raymond Loewy—the “father of industrial design” whose iconic designs shaped appliances, cars, steam locomotives, and corporate logos—can be identified in Earle's sense of streamlined proportion. The sleek mountains and canyons of illustrator Rockwell Kent and the highly abstracted images of speed and movement defined by futurist Giacomo Balla can be easily detected in Earle's art. The twisting trees and jagged branches of fairy tale illustrator Arthur Rackham find their way into Earle's *Sleeping Beauty* glades, from which the jewellike castle rises majestically against a crisp, flat plain. Earle gave the film—and posterity—the archetypal fairy-tale landscape. A masterful illusion, this surging play of opposing visual forces still evokes a primal response in the viewer.

Earle was already an accomplished artist when he arrived at the Walt Disney Studios in 1951 at the age of thirty-four. He was assigned the conceptual design of *Sleeping Beauty*—color schemes, character designs, and background execution. Backgrounds in animated film act as “sets” upon which the animated action takes place. With a single artist in charge of these key aspects of the film's visual appearance, consistency could be maintained throughout. The resulting film would yield a unified visual experience. Thanks to extensive travels and studies throughout his youth, Earle's influences—in addition to the art deco masters and modernist imagists—included early Gothic architecture, Persian miniatures, Japanese botanical screens, and painters of the Northern Renaissance. Earle drew upon this wide-ranging vocabulary to create the film's unique visual identity.

Producing animated films was a lengthy affair in precomputer days. In production for an unprecedented six years, *Sleeping Beauty* required painstaking drawing, painting, and attention to miniature detail. Earle's designs were notoriously intricate and took much longer to complete than backgrounds in previous Disney features. At many points during the design process, his elaborate compositions threatened to overwhelm the main characters of the story. His designs for what were intended to be background scenes sparked both admiration and frustration on the part of assistant animators. Yet in the end, Earle's vision prevailed and defined the film's enduring look. The labyrinth of walls, turrets, ruined arches, and complicated stonework dungeons all form a powerful contrast with the rounded shapes of nature—those stylized gumdrop trees rising out of serpentine hills. Bold diagonal compositions invite the viewer to ascend vertiginous stairways up to oversized towers and down into murky dungeons. The exaggerated folds, drapery, and swirling landforms were of a piece with Earle's later artwork in which chevrons and spirals echo each other in daring succession.

Ultimately Earle's designs not only defined the film's modernist design but also gave it the landmark status it enjoys to this day. A daring blend of streamlined modernism and Renaissance tropes, Earle's vision avoided cuteness and still appears fresh to twenty-first-century eyes.

## High Modernist Design

The work Eyvind Earle created for Disney specialized in sleek geometries of line and form. But with a twist! His *streamline moderne* is richly embroidered with fantasy. Inspired by 1930s art deco style, Earle gave his horizontal fields and hills rounded edges—smooth, unimpeded surfaces upon which dragons and knights, wild forest creatures, and adventurous royals could work out their animated dramas. His visual architecture quotes futurism as well as surrealism. Airstream trailers, ocean liners with supersized cylindrical stacks, the curved hoods and fenders of the automotive avant-garde—all bear a family resemblance to the trees, hills, and seascapes that sprang up under Earle's restless paintbrush. Showcased in *Sleeping Beauty*, his exceptional color sense decreed lavish expanses of chartreuse menaced by deep-purple dragons, or mauve

skies punctuated by teal forests. Earle used color to reinforce mood; washes of turquoise suggest idyllic reverie, malevolence is announced with black, purple, and glowing orange. By elongating shadows, he could suggest an infinite time span in which evil threatened happiness. And his expert use of knife-edged shadows heightened a sense of impending danger. In his fantastically impossible world, nature became a magic act.

## Beyond Animation

Before his most important work for Disney, which also included concept art for animated landmarks such as *Lady and the Tramp* (1955) and *Peter Pan* (1953), Eyvind Earle had acquired an untraditional education by traveling with his father through Mexico and France, attending private schools, and painting all the way. After a debut art exhibition in Paris, Earle returned to the United States in his late teens and worked as an assistant sketch artist for United Artists, after which he continued traveling and painting across the country. The watercolors he painted and sold to finance his wanderings later found their way into urban exhibitions.

Earle's highly original style attracted the Walt Disney Studios, where he worked off and on for the next fifteen years. (He was posthumously awarded the prestigious Disney Legend Award for his contributions to animation.) Earle joined Disney in 1951 as an assistant background painter and worked his way up to the position of color stylist for *Sleeping Beauty*. Leaving Disney just before the film's release, he worked first for John Sutherland Productions and then began his own animation company in 1961. With his own animation company, Earle could pursue his visions without compromise.

Earle's reputation for innovation led to work producing trademark logos, print ads, television commercials, and film trailers throughout the 1960s. Returning to painting full-time in 1966, Earle branched out into limited-edition serigraphs inspired by his love for natural landscapes. Wild storms, rushing waterfalls, crashing surf, and steep canyons all came to life under his brush, ignited by intense color schemes. He continued to pour his passion into remarkable and robust landscapes for the rest of his life.

*Golden hills, craggy oaks, and swirling ocean form the heart of many of Eyvind Earle's later images, showing the clear influence of the central California coast and Carmel region he called home for the last decades of his life.*

## The Carmel Years

Golden hills, craggy oaks, and swirling ocean form the heart of many of Eyvind Earle's later images, showing the clear influence of the central California coast and Carmel region he called home for the last decades of his life. Nature, rich with energy, seems to infuse and engage his prodigious output. Cattle graze on brilliant emerald pastures at the edge of cliffs falling into swirling ocean surf. These are invariably windswept images—envisioned as if aerodynamically sculpted. Each element, each curve, each color exaggerated, pushed almost to the point of distortion. Monumental trees don't simply grow, they twist and spiral their way up out of the ground, forming spirals of dark architecture beyond which the landscape falls away in layers of blue. Earle's cliffs are vertiginous, his meadows blindingly golden, and his clouds race like birds of prey across vermillion skies.

The choice of Carmel-by-the-Sea must have been obvious to the painter. He had developed a fondness for the charming town on childhood vacations. In the late 1960s, Earle had a series of one-man exhibitions at the Zantman Art Galleries and Galeria Americana in Carmel. He eventually moved here with his wife, Joan, in 1988. It was in this intimate art community of Carmel-by-the-Sea that Earle chose to settle down and be at home for the remainder of his life. The unmistakable Carmel fog and rugged Big Sur coastline became signature subjects for many of Earle's later works.

The Monterey Bay area was close to Earle's creative heart for the better part of his life and inspired his imagination most deeply during his final decades. The artist's lifelong passion for natural forms made the perfect fit with the Carmel region's moody weather and bewitching geography. Fog, waves, meadows, windswept trees—all found graphic inflection by the artist who had imagined the myth-infused setting of *Sleeping Beauty*. “For seventy years,” Earle wrote in 1996, “I’ve painted paintings, and I’m constantly and everlastingly overwhelmed at the stupendous infinity of Nature. Wherever I turn and look, there I see creation. Art is creating . . . Art is the search for truth.”

Eyvind Earle established Eyvind Earle Publishing LLC to continue his legacy by organizing exhibitions and shows in galleries and museum worldwide. Since Earle's passing on July 20, 2000, at the age of eighty-four, many of his rarely seen works—a substantial body of watercolors, drawings, paintings, and sculptures—have been collected by Earle Publishing, which creates limited-edition serigraphs from Earle paintings owned by private collectors as well as from Joan Earle's collections. Since 1991, Gallery 21 in Carmel has exhibited the largest collection of Eyvind Earle's artwork anywhere in the world.

### Happy Endings

Eyvind Earle's instincts were prophetic. It turned out that the fairy-tale castle I'd visited as a girl was to be adopted by Walt Disney Pictures as the inspiration for its own fairy-tale Disney logo as well as its *Sleeping Beauty* replica castles in Disneyland parks across the country. With his flawless eye, Earle had chosen well when he painted those first designs for the animated landmark. The shimmering castle

motif was key to the film's enduring legacy. The imagery designed by Earle continues to enjoy a mythic existence wherever fairy tales are celebrated.

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## EYVIND EARLE

*Surf, Wind, and Fog*, 1993  
Oil on canvas, 48 x 36 in



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