

The Art and Design of Leo Lionni

*In practical and moral terms, you must
be responsible for every line you draw,
for every decision you make.*

—Leo Lionni

A twentieth-century giant of children's books and modernist aesthetics, Leo Lionni was a maker and bridge of worlds. His work remains valuable for its moral depth, artistic integrity, humanity, and practical idealism. The first major American retrospective of his art and design, organized and presented by Norman Rockwell Museum, showcases what made this consummate creator both extraordinary and deeply relatable. Audiences will delight in the whimsy of his work for children and adults—and take courage from his gentle resistance to unjust social norms.



Between Worlds: The Art and Design of Leo Lionni is named for the title of his 1997 autobiography. In it, he emphasizes the moral responsibility of the artist: "In practical and moral terms, you must be responsible for every line you draw, for every decision you make." Alongside this dictum is Lionni's deep joy in creating. Both aspects, inextricably linked, are richly explored in this first American retrospective of his art. Norman Rockwell Museum's exhibition brings together approximately 170 artworks and artifacts that span the artist's long career and encompass the three distinct yet interrelated domains of his work: modernist graphic design and art direction for advertisements and magazines like *Fortune* and *Print*; globally beloved children's picture books; and personal works inspired by nature, including sculptures, paintings, drawings, and jewelry.

Lionni's vision as an artist and creator was both timely and timeless. This retrospective encourages viewers to see and experience the world as Lionni did—as a place of possibility; as a world in which individuals can find their unique place and make a difference. A recent article on the exhibition in *Smithsonian Magazine* describes Lionni's enduring resonance this way: "With the current rise of book censorship, the issues Lionni explored throughout his career—how to express yourself and contribute to your community—are particularly pertinent today. As Frederick, his storytelling mouse, reminds us: When shared, art can uplift and connect us."

Between Worlds: The Art and Design of Leo Lionni is co-curated by Norman Rockwell Museum Chief Curator Stephanie Haboush Plunkett with noted authors and illustration historians Steven Heller and Leonard S. Marcus. Annie Lionni, the artist's granddaughter and the steward of his art, is a close collaborator.

Leo Lionni (1910-1999) Cover illustration for *Frederick*, 1967 (Knopf) ©Leo Lionni. Mixed media collage. All rights reserved. Courtesy of the Lionni Family.

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

- The exhibition includes approximately 170 original artworks, artifacts, published illustration tearsheets, photographs, book dummies, and other materials encompassing the artist's graphic design and art direction work, children's books, and personal art.
- Interpretive materials include text panels, labels, and catalogue essays (see publication information below).

Space Requirements: Approximately 3,000 sq. feet

Exhibition Fee: \$35,000 for approximately a 12-week period

Tour Availability: Available beginning Summer 2024

Publication

Accompanying this major exhibition is a catalogue published by Abbeville Press, the first to present Lionni's extraordinary career in the round. *Leo Lionni: Storyteller, Artist, Designer* features essays and images that showcase Lionni's scope, depth, and worldwide appeal. Reviews have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and elsewhere.

Twenty-four years after his death, the book lowers the velvet ropes separating the quadrants of Leo Lionni's creative output. Who knew that the creator of the most recognizable mice since Stuart Little also dreamed up the prototype for Sports Illustrated? ... Lionni had a rare ability to change shades—and retain his signature vibrancy—while moving, seemingly effortlessly, from one realm to another.

—Elisabeth Egan
New York Times Book Review

There was something special in Lionni's ability to integrate his creativity. The exhibition shows what a holistic, Renaissance creator he was and how his imagination and talents spanned at least three acts of his play.

—Steven Heller,
quoted in *Smithsonian Magazine*

Leo Lionni (1910-1999) was a kind of twentieth-century Leonardo. His artistic pursuits spanned an early association with the Italian Futurists to a career as a leading figure in postwar American graphic art and design to a surprising "second career" as a creator of collage-based children's books that have helped generations of children find their place in the world. All along the way, he honed his personal artistic vision through painting, drawing, lithographs, sculpture, and mosaic.

Born in Amsterdam to a Jewish father who worked as an oil company accountant and a Christian mother who was an opera singer, Lionni lived and traveled widely in Europe, America, Asia, and North Africa. Idealism and a global vision enliven his work. In his graphic art and design for major American and European brands and institutions, he sought to create a visual *lingua franca* that could

bridge and unite the world's cultures. His gently fabulist children's books—including classics such as *Frederick*, *Cornelius*, and *Little Blue and Little Yellow*—sensitively explore the relationship between the individual and the group. Lionni was also a lifelong observer of nature who over a period of years created a fantasy plant world rendered in different media.

This groundbreaking exhibition tells the story, in images and text, of Lionni's adventurous art and life. It brings together works spanning the different domains of Lionni's creativity and celebrates his lifelong spirit of "making it new" through reimagining subjects, themes, and stylistic approaches.

"Look!" he said. "I can stand on my head, 1983.
Illustration for *Cornelius*
by Leo Lionni.(Pantheon Books). Collage on board

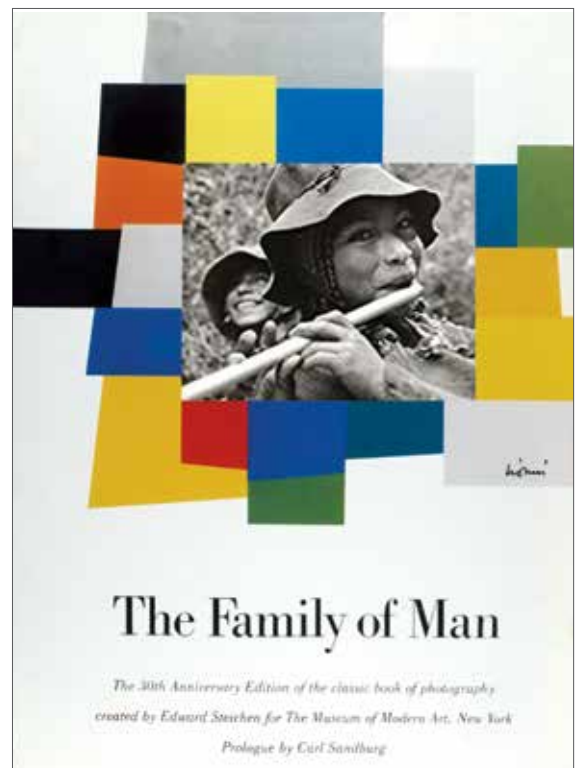


Graphic Design and Art Direction

As a young artist living in Italy, Lionni discovered graphic design, a bridge between art and commerce. With the spread of fascism, Lionni left for the United States in 1939, accepting a job at N. W. Ayer in Philadelphia, the third-largest advertising agency in the nation. He quickly made a name for himself. Lionni was best at creative, nuanced campaigns rather than hard-sell ads, and proved to be especially gifted as an art director.

As explored by the keen eye of curator Steven Heller, the section on graphic design features key examples of Lionni's innovative freelance work for Olivetti, Container Corporation of America, Ford Motor Company, the American Cancer Society, the "Never Underestimate the Power of a Woman" campaign for *Ladies' Home Journal*, the prototype issue of *Sports Illustrated*, and the Museum of Modern Art, including his poster for MoMA's 25th anniversary and work for the "Family of Man" exhibition curated by Edward Steichen. Also featured are Lionni's striking book covers of classic works for Vintage Press.

This section also highlights and contextualizes Lionni's tenure as art director for *Fortune* (1948-1960) and *Print* (1955-1956) magazines. In addition to designing striking covers and interior layouts, he commissioned the work of young illustrators such as Andy Warhol and artists including Fernand Leger, Willem De Kooning, and Alexander Calder to create legendary campaigns. In 1958, Lionni designed "Unfinished Business," a controversial pavilion at the Brussels World's Fair. The pavilion, sponsored by *Fortune* magazine, featured an exhibition of photographs reflecting America's most challenging social issues, including racial inequality. A visiting congressmen objected and the pavilion was abruptly closed.



Top: Photographer Unknown, Leo Lionni in Olivetti showroom, detail, c.1956.

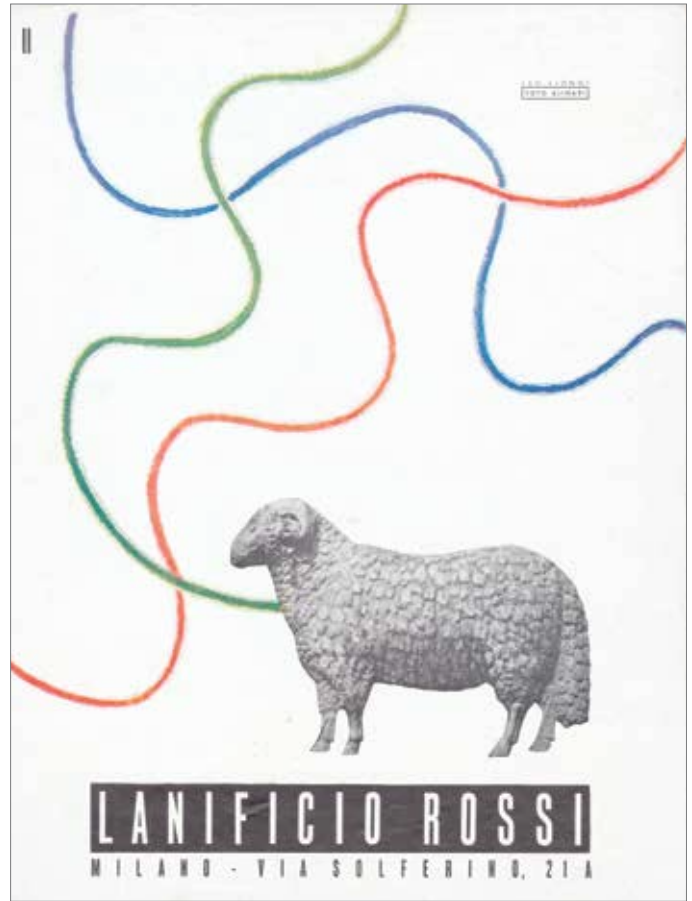
Middle: Leo Lionni, Olivetti Invitation Design, detail c.1956.
Showroom invitation.

Bottom: Leo Lionni (1910-1999)
The Family of Man, 1955. Exhibition catalogue cover
design for *The Family of Man*, MoMA, 1955
Print

Bottom left: Leo Lionni (1910-1999)
Swashbucklers all! Buckler pump! Buckler sabot!, c. 1940.
 Advertisement for the Joyce Shoe Company, Pasadena, CA
 Tearsheet
 Courtesy of the Lionni Family
 Illustration for *Harper's Weekly*, January 24, 1863
 Norman Rockwell Museum Collection

Top right: Leo Lionni (1910-1999)
Lanerossi, c. 1930s
 Advertisement for Lanerossi wool company
 Booklet
 Courtesy of the Lionni Family

Bottom right: Leo Lionni (1910-1999)
Aluminum is Texture, Alcoa is Aluminum, c. 1950s
 Advertisement for Alcoa Aluminum
 Booklet
 Courtesy of the Lionni Family



Children's Picture Books

Lionni reached a crossroads the next year. He began to imagine a future without deadlines in which he made paintings and sculptures for his own satisfaction. Just then, however, fate intervened. Lionni discovered the artform that was to absorb much of his creative energies for the next forty years: the children's picture book.

Curated by Leonard S. Marcus, this section features original art and preliminary drawings for several of Lionni's most notable children's picture books, including *Frederick*, *Inch by Inch*, *Pezzettino*, and *Matthew's Dream*, which have been published in foreign-language editions around the world. Also on view is the never-before displayed "book dummy" of *Little Blue and Little Yellow*, giving viewers their first chance ever to see how Lionni's first picture book—a groundbreaker in the genre—was made. *Little Blue and Little Yellow* arose quite spontaneously on a commuter train as the artist sought to amuse his grandchildren by improvising a tale involving torn pieces of paper from a magazine. The book's powerful themes of friendship, difference, and belonging almost certainly were the artist's way of "finishing the business" of his interrupted World's Fair exhibition.



"Leo Lionni: Storyteller, Artist, Designer offers a fascinating look at the man behind the beloved children's books whose themes continue to resonate with young readers today. His story is an encouraging reminder that being ourselves — however many selves there may be — is always best."

—Lauren Moya Ford
Hyperallergic

Interpretive text in this section highlights the moral and psychological depth of Lionni's works for children. Many of his books explore the need to balance our unique sense of self with our roles in social and cultural groups. Gently but incisively, he addresses urgent social issues such as equal rights and war and peace. And he shows children the social value and personal joy of creative endeavor and artmaking. Lionni recognized that children were the people most capable of change, and his books offered him a way to quietly influence future generations. His rich literary legacy includes four Caldecott Honors for excellence in illustration, as well as dozens of other prizes and, nearly twenty-five years after his death, a strong and growing readership worldwide.

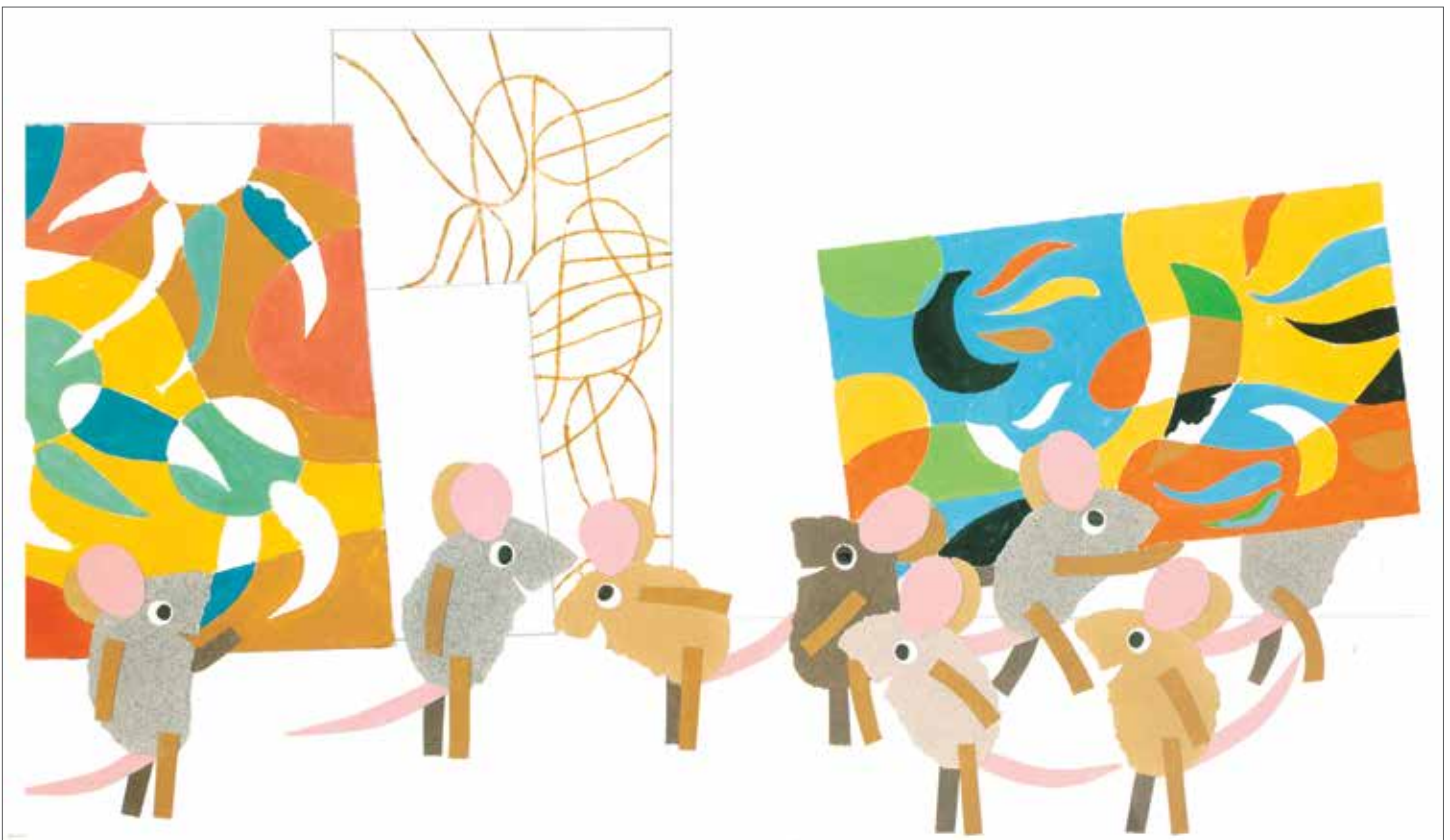
Top: Leo Lionni (1910-1999) Illustration for *The Alphabet Tree*, 1968 (Knopf) Mixed media on paper © Leo Lionni. All rights reserved. Courtesy of the Lionni Family

Bottom: Leo Lionni (1910-1999) Illustration detail from *The Biggest House in the World*, 1968 (Pantheon) © Leo Lionni. All rights reserved. Courtesy of the Lionni Family





Leo Lionni (1910-1999) Illustration for *Pezzettino*, 1975 (Knopf)
Mixed media collage
© Leo Lionni. All rights reserved. Courtesy of the Lionni Family

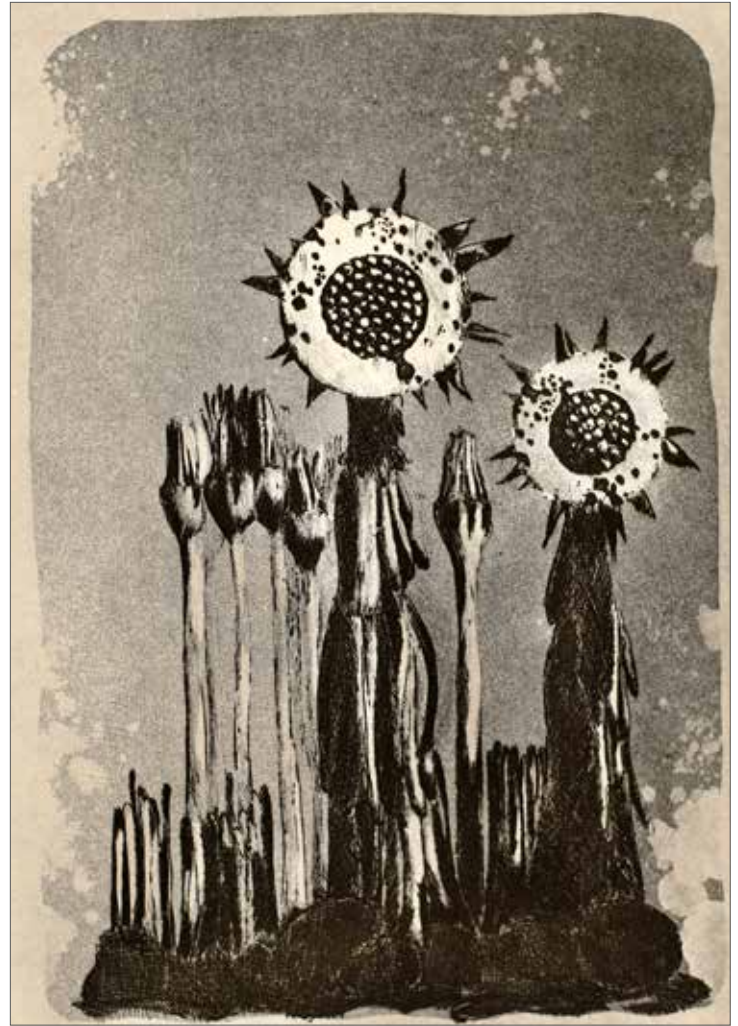


Leo Lionni (1910-1999) Illustration for *Matthew's Dream*, 1991 (Knopf)
Mixed media collage
© Leo Lionni. All rights reserved.

Personal Art: Art with a Capital "A"

Leo Lionni aspired to be an artist from a young age. Throughout his life, he created paintings, sculptures, printmaking, drawings, and collage works, and showed his fine art at various venues. After moving back to Italy in mid-life, he plunged into his personal art practice with gusto. He published an artist's book called *Parallel Botany*, a richly imagined world of fantastical botany, complete with drawings, text, travel stories, and etymologies. Selections of these paintings and sculptures form the core of the exhibition's personal art section. These delightfully imaginative works reflect Lionni's lifelong and deeply felt connection to the natural world.

Leo Lionni (1910-1999)
Illustration for *Parallel Botany*, 1976.
© Leo Lionni. All rights reserved.
Courtesy of the Lionni Family



Photographer Unknown
Leo Lionni with Profile Cut Outs, c. 1970
Courtesy of the Lionni Family



Steven Heller is the co-chair of the School of Visual Arts MFA Design / Designer as Author + Entrepreneur program and of the SVA Masters Workshop in Rome. He wrote the "Visuals" column for the *New York Times Book Review*, where he also had a distinguished career as the Book Review's art director. He has written a weekly column for *The Atlantic* online and currently writes *The Daily Heller / Imprint* online. Heller is the author of 150 introductions/forewords and over 180 books on graphic design, illustration, and political art. His honors include the Eric Carle Museum Carle Honors Award, Art Directors Club Special Educators Award, the AIGA Medal for Lifetime Achievement, the School of Visual Arts' Masters Series Award, and the 2011 National Design Award for "Design Mind."

Leonard S. Marcus is one of the world's foremost authorities on children's books and the people who create them. The author or editor of more than 25 award-winning books, he is a regular contributor to the *New York Times Book Review*, four-time judge of the *Times'* Best Illustrated Books Awards, and a frequent commentator on radio and television. Marcus is the founding trustee of the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art and has curated numerous exhibitions in the field. He teaches at the School of Visual Arts and lectures about his work across the world. Marcus holds an honorary doctorate of humane letters from the Bank Street College of Education and is the only American to have won the Chen Bochui Award for special contributions to the development of Chinese children's literature.

Stephanie Haboush Plunkett is the Chief Curator of Norman Rockwell Museum. She has organized many exhibitions focused on the art of Norman Rockwell and the field of illustration, and leads the Rockwell Center for American Visual Studies, the first scholarly institute devoted to illustration. Her recent publications include "The Shifting Postwar Marketplace: Illustration in the United States and Canada, 1940-1970" in *History of Illustration; Drawing Lessons from the Famous Artists School: Classic Techniques and Expert Tips from the Golden Age of Illustration; Enduring Ideals: Rockwell, Roosevelt & the Four Freedoms; Norman Rockwell: Drawings, 1911 to 1973; and Tony Sarg: Genius at Play.*

EXHIBITION CONTACTS

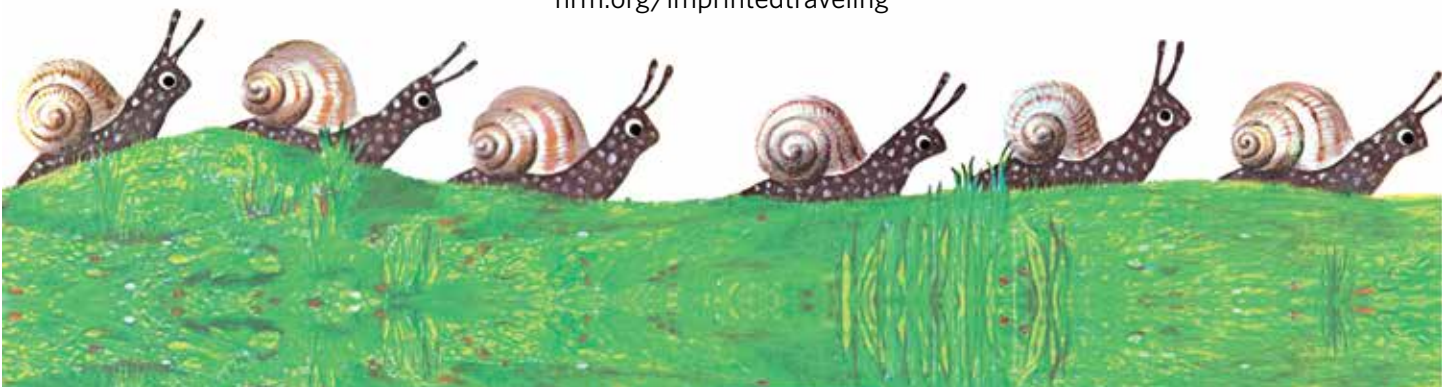
Laurie Norton Moffatt
Director/CEO
(413) 931-2232
LNMoffatt@nrm.org

Stephanie Plunkett
Deputy Director/Chief Curator
(413) 931-2208
splunkett@nrm.org

Jana Purdy
Project Coordinator
(413) 931-2204
jpurdy@nrm.org

NORMAN ROCKWELL MUSEUM

For more information visit:
nrm.org/imprintedtraveling



Leo Lionni (1910-1999) Illustration detail from *The Biggest House in the World*, 1968 (Pantheon) © Leo Lionni. All rights reserved. Courtesy of the Lionni Family