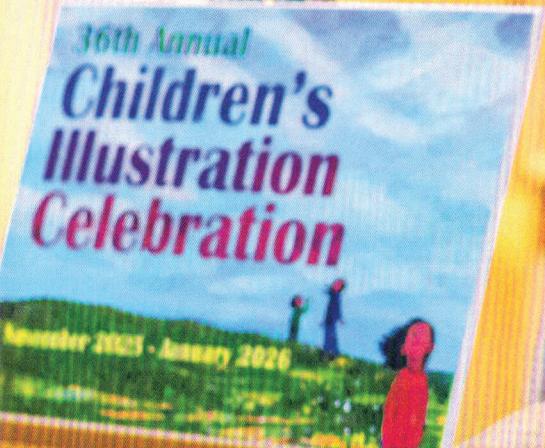


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R. MICHELSON GALLERIES
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R. MICHELSON GALLERIES

Redefining Fine Art Through Picture Books

BY TINA LESNIAK

PHOTO BY NATE BLAIS

For more than four decades, R. Michelson Galleries has stood as a beacon of creativity in downtown Northampton, redefining what fine art can look like and who it is for. From museum curators and collectors to families with young children, the gallery welcomes visitors into a world where illustration, sculpture, and contemporary fine art share equal footing. At the heart of it all is founder and owner Richard Michelson, whose journey to Western Massachusetts—and to becoming one of the nation's most influential champions of picture book art—began with a chance decision and a borrowed hallway.

"In 1979, my wife literally picked the Amherst/Northampton area off a map; neither of us had ever been here before," Michelson said. Growing up in East New York, Brooklyn, he longed for a community rich with culture. On the drive to his new home, he stopped for dinner and happened to be reading a poetry chapbook illustrated with wood engravings by a young artist named Barry Moser. A note in the book revealed Moser taught at Williston-Northampton Prep School. "I picked up a phone book and called," he said.

That spontaneous connection led to the gallery's first exhibition—hung not in a traditional gallery space, but in a narrow corridor between two stores on the second floor of Thorne's Marketplace. Michelson and Moser priced the engravings between \$25 and \$50. Unable to afford a formal storefront, Michelson improvised. "I bought a shower curtain from my neighbor's store, pulled it closed at the end of the workday, and secured it with a padlock," he said. From that humble beginning, R. Michelson Galleries began its unlikely ascent.

Over the years, the gallery relocated several times and gradually expanded its roster of artists, including Leonard Baskin, who had returned to the area after years in

England. At a time when abstract, pop, and op art dominated the art world, Michelson found himself drawn to emotionally rich representational work. The turn toward children's book illustration, however, came reluctantly.

In 1985, when Moser was asked to illustrate a picture book, Michelson admits he was skeptical. "Are you going to start painting cute little watercolor bunnies?" he joked. When the exhibition sold nothing, Michelson nonetheless found himself introduced to emerging literary giants Jane Yolen and Eric Carle. "I did not grow up with books," he said. The first children's book his daughter recalls him reading aloud was Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis." But exposure to the artistry of picture books changed everything. "I had to admit that the art was equal in both skill and vision to anything I saw in my favorite museums."

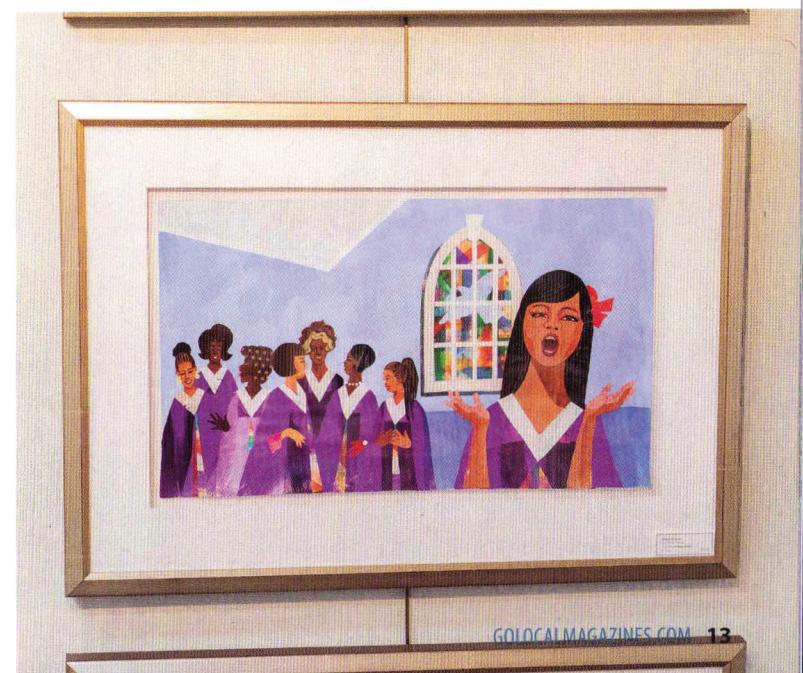
What followed was a decade of financial risk and cultural resistance. "There was no market for original children's art books when I began exhibiting it, and we lost money for over a decade," Michelson said. Museums did not return his calls. Then the tide slowly shifted. Advances in color printing and the rise of a new generation of parents ushered in what became known as the golden age of picture books. Eventually, museums began to take notice.

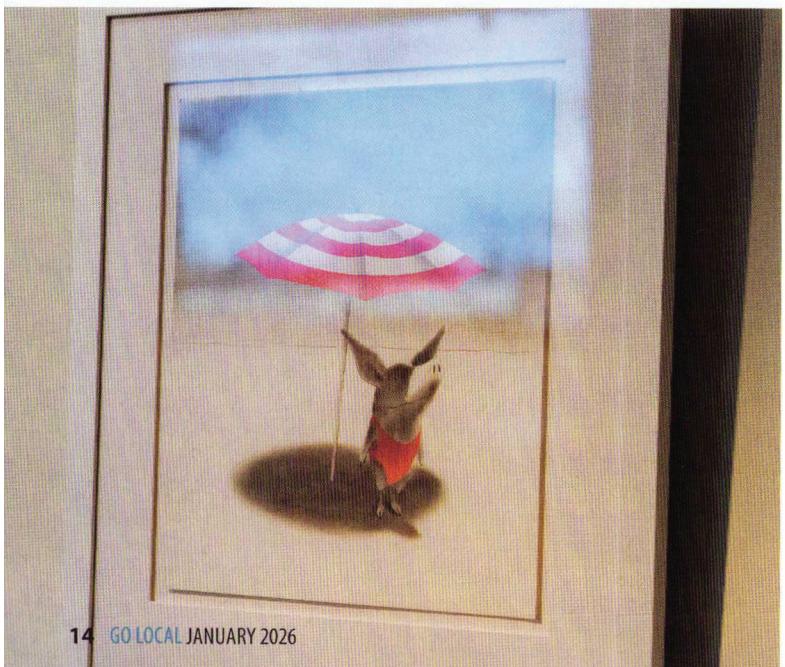
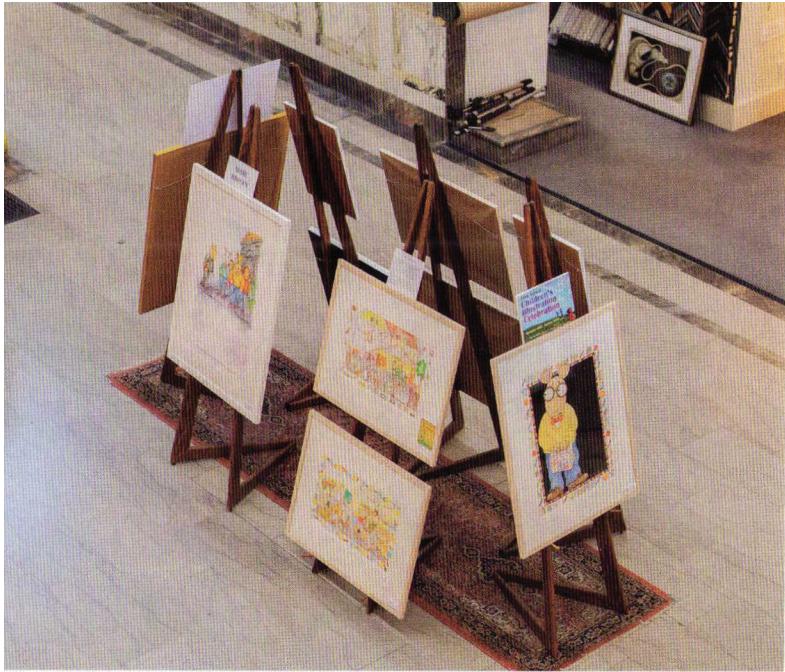
One pivotal call came from a Chrysler Museum curator named Nicholas Clark, who would go on to become the founding director of the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in nearby Amherst. Today, Michelson curates more than a dozen major museum exhibitions around the world each year. Most recently, filmmaker George Lucas acquired more than 200 works from R. Michelson artists — including Ezra Jack Keats, Jerry Pinkney, and Bryan Collier — for his Museum of Narrative Art opening in Los Angeles in 2026.

Michelson sees illustration and fine art as inherently intertwined. "When Michelangelo was painting the Sistine Chapel, he was illustrating a book," he said. "It did not restrict his genius." He believes illustrators simply work with text as a point of departure, rather than as a limitation. "I am pleased to have played a small part in dissolving the differentiation between the two."

Today, illustration has become the gallery's primary economic engine. "People come from all over the world to visit our gallery and surround themselves with the illustrations they most love," Michelson said. At the same time, the gallery continues to exhibit leading contemporary fine artists and sculptors, maintaining its broad artistic mission.

R. Michelson Galleries has also helped shape the area's identity as a regional arts destination. Alongside institutions like the Eric Carle Museum, Norman Rockwell Museum, and the Dr. Seuss Museum, the gallery has helped





establish Western Massachusetts as a national hub for book illustration. A new four-story mural on the back of the gallery building, designed by assistant gallery manager Meghan Zaremba, features beloved characters from Arthur, Paddington, Elephant and Piggie, Madeline, Where the Wild Things Are, and more. “The mural has become a must-see tourist attraction,” Michelson said. “Then people come inside to see the original artwork.”

The gallery itself now occupies a stately 1913 building with four floors and soaring 60-foot ceilings. “We’ve come a long way from our original hallway,” Michelson said. The multiple rooms allow him to curate diverse exhibitions simultaneously, making the space inviting for seasoned collectors and first-time visitors alike.

That inclusivity remains central to the gallery’s mission. “We welcome young children and their families into the gallery and want everyone to feel comfortable,” Michelson said, listing his staff by name. “There aren’t too many places left where three generations can visit together and all be equally excited to see a Dr. Seuss original watercolor or a Jules Feiffer drawing from *The Phantom Tollbooth*. How cool is that!”

Looking ahead, the gallery shows no signs of slowing down. Its artists have collectively earned 18 Caldecott Medals and 43 Caldecott Honor Awards through the years. Upcoming highlights include original artwork from Ian Falconer’s *Olivia* series and the first-ever exhibition of Sandra Boynton’s beloved hippos, pigs, and gnus. Rare wood sculptures by Leonard Baskin are also slated for exhibition in 2026.

“Come visit us,” Michelson said. “We can talk about art all day, but seeing the work in person will take you to another level entirely.”

RMICELSON GALLERIES IS OPEN SUNDAY FROM NOON TO 5 P.M., MONDAY BY APPOINTMENT, TUESDAY-THURSDAY FROM 10 A.M. TO 6 P.M., FRIDAY NOON TO 8 P.M., AND SATURDAY 10 A.M. TO 8 P.M. VISIT THEIR WEBSITE AT WWW.RMICELSON.COM OR CALL 413-586-3964 FOR MORE INFO. YOU CAN ALSO FOLLOW THEIR FACEBOOK PAGE AT WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/R.MICELSON.GALLERIES.

