

{PROFILE}

Helene Magisson



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Helene's dreamy, soft artworks have found been influenced by her diverse background travelling and art education. She's recently found a new role as a children's book illustrator and we are lucky to learn more about this talented artist.

Outline: You have such a diverse background with so much travel and adventure by the sounds of it! Could you share with us your history and some of the places you have lived, studied and worked, and your journey as an illustrator?

Helene: I was born in Nairobi (Kenya) and had been living in different countries in Africa for my first 10 years.

My mother was French and my father was German but I didn't know anything about Europe. I was just enjoying the best of these African countries. The people, the light, the colours, the landscapes...which I loved so much. And one day we had to leave and settle down to France.

At the beginning, it was a real shock to me. Everything was grey, cold and sad. And slowly, very slowly, I discovered the richness of the culture in France. It was not only about croissant and cheese but also about architecture, museums, paintings...

I remember the day I did completely fall in love with the Mezzetin painted by Watteau. That was the beginning of everything! I was 15. And then I could not imagine my life without paintings, their texture, their smell, and most of all without Leonardo da Vinci, Michel Angelo and Vermeer... all these geniuses.

I studied history of art at the Louvre combined with a bachelor of painting restoration which was really a passion to me. My courses also included medieval illumination. The beginning in the history of illustration in fact.

After graduating, I did work as a painting restorer for a few

years in Paris, got married and moved a bit later to India with my husband and 3 children.

I discovered there an incredibly fascinating culture. Indians are absolutely fantastic artists in so many ways. Classical dance, classical music, paintings with their beautiful miniatures. It has been for me another fantastic source of inspiration.

We then left India and moved to Australia. There we are!

It was the right time for me to start something new, something I had always wanted to do, but never been given the chance to try.

I decided to be a children's book illustrator. Somehow it was an old dream and I just felt ready for it.

I had to work hard to "move" from classical art to illustration (still working on it). Which is not the same even though I always use my art background when illustrating.

I started working everyday on my portfolio. At first I tried to illustrate some traditional fairy tales picking advice from other illustrators, books, interesting blogs and websites as Illustrators Australia, spending hours in bookstores reading children's books, trying to understand what was working. And one day, I felt ready to submit my portfolio and attend some competitions.

Outline: Could you explain further in-depth details of your studies and work as a "painting restorer"?

Helene: Studying painting restoration, I think, is the most complete way to approach the art of painting. We





need to have good skills in both the history of art and the techniques.

We have to understand and be able to make all kind of traditional techniques and products used by the painters from different centuries. So because of that we also had to study chemistry. We had very strong visual art courses, studying the paintings of the greatest artists. These art courses especially are still very important for me in my work today.

Before restoring a painting we have to know how it is made.

Painters used either a canvas made of linen or cotton, or a panel of wood. Then they covered it with a first layer of glue (most commonly it was rabbit skin glue), and then they applied a few layers of gesso which they polished.

After that the artists created their own paints by mixing pigments powders with a binding medium.

And finally they protected the work with a fine layer of varnish. But all these materials and techniques depend on the century, on the country, on the painters....

So when we have a painting to restore we need to know all about these different layers and be able to restore from the fabric to the varnish. Each painting is unique.

And we can restore everything. The results are incredible.

I had once a beautiful painting from the 18th century. It was a man lavishly dressed and there was a big hole just on his hand, probably made by a shell from the Second World War. First I had to consolidate the canvas, then remove the varnish with the right chemical, add a fine layer of gesso to cover the hole and then start painting the missing hand again but (very important) exactly with the style of the painter. As restorers, we have to comply with the painter's own style. There is no place for creativity.

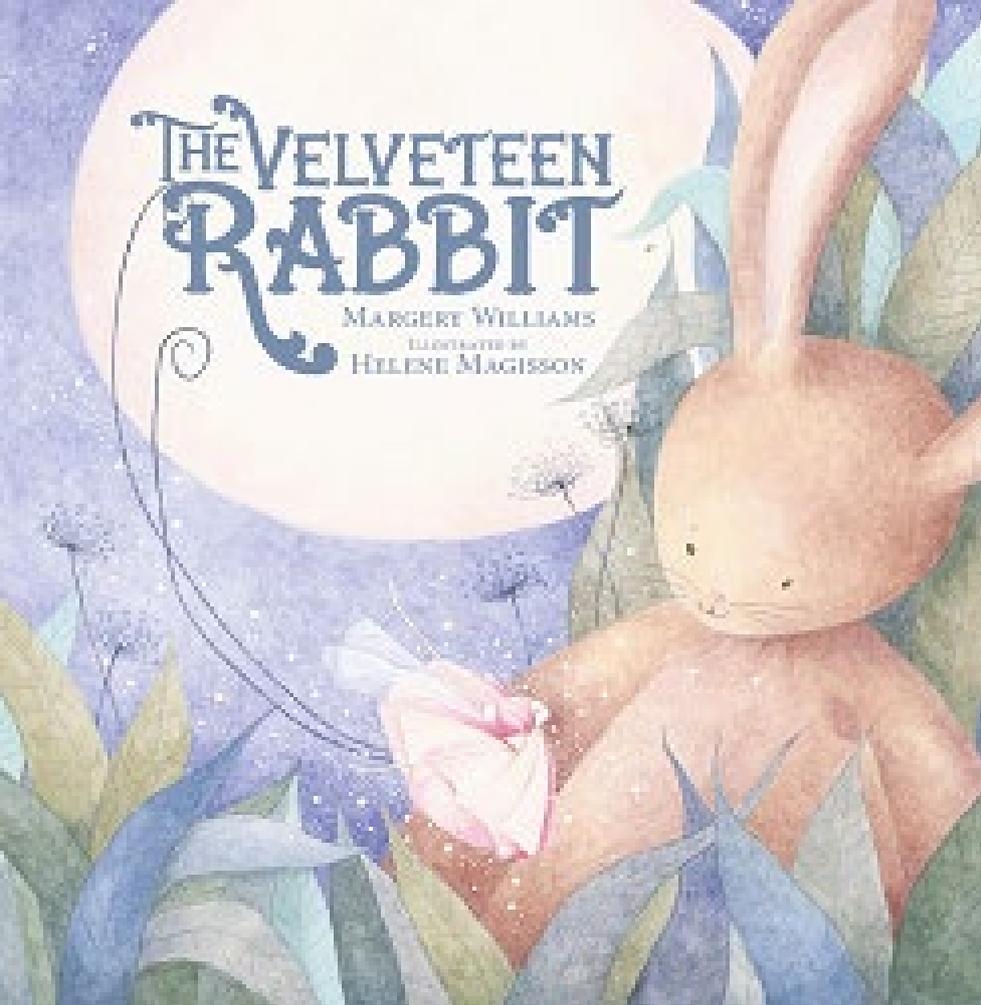
Outline: Have you exhibited before?

Helene: I did exhibit a few times in France and Germany when I was doing illumination in parallel of my work. It was a special style, mixing medieval art with oriental influences inspired by my 3 years in India. Using bright colours with medieval themes, or Indian cultural ideas with medieval compositions...

I used real parchment, real gold leaves and tempera (egg yolks and pigments powders), which was quite fun to create and very entertaining. A work somewhere between two cultures.

Outline: Congratulations for winning the CYA illustration award in 2013, and releasing your first picture book in March! We'd love to hear about your picture book journey.

Helene: I attended the CYA conference, where I had a



illustration/art work?

Helene: Stories created for children can be so charming, whimsical, touching. And it is so much rewarding to illustrate a story you really love. There is no limit to the imagination, poetry and creativity.

I love the relation between the text and the illustrations. When they perfectly match, it is like a gem in your hand.

I also like the idea of working on a full book. It is not about individual illustrations added one after the other. As a children's book illustrator you have to think at your work as a whole which needs to be harmonious and yet you have to surprise.

There is the challenge of creating the characters page after page, the pace and more than everything find the very special idea to illustrate the text. You have to touch the children (so, think as a child) but also the adult. I always keep that in mind. Reading a book is a special moment shared between the parents and their children.

A book should be a pleasure to read again and again but also a pleasure for the eyes just to look at the illustrations again and again.

All that is incredibly challenging. It is exactly what I like because I have the feeling that I can always do better, go further. I always need to reinvent... It is never finished. And there are so many possibilities and different ways to illustrate a book.

It is a work of passion and it makes me happy.

Outline: Could you talk us through the technical process you use to create your work?

Helene: I use only traditional techniques: hundreds of different brushes, extra-large papers with strange smells, and thousands of different water colours... so my art studio is always incredibly messy!

I never use pure water colour. I mix 2 colours (sometimes 3), always 'playing' with the amount of pigments so that the layers are never completely plain and flat. I like when it vibrates. I work on a few layers first with a rough brush and after 2 or 3 layers with soft brushes to polish the final aspect.

I sometimes use a first layer of gesso with a pigment and then I paint on it with another colour of water colour. It can give some interesting textures and colours.

For some special small parts (like faces, or other little

pitch with Sophia Whitfield from New Frontier Publishing.

I did present her my portfolio, and it seems that she liked it, because 2 days later I had a message from her in my mailbox. She offered me to illustrate the *Velveteen Rabbit* from Margery Williams Bianco. It really took me some time to believe it. Starting my children's book illustration journey with such a well-known tale, was so fortunate but also intimidating.

It was a great project, which kept me busy for 7 months.

The *Velveteen Rabbit* is a charming classical story which can delight children but also adults as there is a deeper meaning behind the story. The kind of book you grow with and you never forget.

I wanted the atmosphere to be very soft and light to emphasize the beauty and the flow of the text. I added many tiny details that a child's eye can follow all along the story.

At first, I spent a lot of time sketching to create the main characters, to find the right ideas, the dynamic, and the composition. This part is the most difficult, I think. Then, I created roughs for each page, and once they were approved, I could start painting! Which is very enjoyable. The publisher then took over for the design, printing, shipping, and one day...I received my first copy. Difficult to describe the feeling here... It is such an accomplishment...Working on this project was a fantastic pleasure.

Outline: What attracts you to working in the children's book industry versus some of your previous areas of

{PROFILE}

details) I like to use gouache or tempera.

Outline: What other projects are you working on for 2015?

I am working on my second project with New Frontier Publishing which will be released early 2016. A lovely classical tale, elegant with a touch of humour. Much lighter than the Velveteen Rabbit but absolutely adorable.

Outline: Who are your illustration heroes?

Helene: I have many, and all very different but I have a kind of fascination for Rebecca Dautremer and Shaun Tan. They are fully accomplished in their work. There is so much in their illustrations.

The compositions are strong, the tones they use are very rich and special. The combination of the colours are beautiful. But where they are like a genius to me is the way they interpret the text. They can choose an unexpected direction which I sometimes find very surprising but at the

end so interesting.

And their work is really aesthetic. I so much appreciate that. **o**

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