

# J. OTTO SEIBOLD AND MR. LUNCH

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## EDUCATOR RESOURCE GUIDE

**CONTEMPORARY  
JEWISH MUSEUM**

## **Who is J. Otto Seibold?**

J. Otto Seibold (b. 1960) is a self-taught artist who was born in Oakland, California, and grew up an apricots-throw away from the John Muir home in Martinez, CA. He was able to sneak into the art world during the “outsider artist” craze of the 1990s and is the first person to use digital software to create children’s books with *Mr. Lunch Takes a Plane Ride* (1993). Seibold has continued publishing for the past twenty years and is best known for the Mr. Lunch series, as well as *Olive the Other Reindeer* (Chronicle Books, 1997), and *Vunce Upon a Time* (Chronicle Books, 2008).

Also a widely exhibited artist, he has shown work in galleries and museums including Deitch Projects, New York; Paule Anglim, San Francisco; Grass Hut, Portland, OR; MASS MoCA, Adams, MA; and Creative Time’s 42nd Street Art Project. In 2000, Seibold had a solo museum exhibition at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco.

## **About J. Otto Seibold and Mr. Lunch**

*J. Otto Seibold and Mr. Lunch* is based on three books by J. Otto Seibold and Vivian Walsh: *Mr. Lunch Borrows a Canoe*, *Free Lunch*, and *Mr. Lunch Takes a Plane Ride*. Mr. Lunch, a bird-chasing dog loosely inspired by Seibold’s own Jack Russell Terrier, is a well-intentioned character who often faces unintended consequences. In conjunction with the twentieth anniversary of the *Mr.*

*Lunch* books, *J. Otto Seibold and Mr.*

*Lunch* explores *Mr. Lunch’s* history and Seibold’s artistic process. Seibold, one of America’s most beloved and influential authors of children’s books, remains somewhat of a hidden treasure here in the Bay Area. Born and raised in the East Bay, where he still resides, his *Mr. Lunch* books (written with Vivian Walsh) are the first children’s books designed using computer software. Along with process pieces, like dummy books and original sketches, and original full-color artwork, the exhibition includes interactive areas for children designed by Seibold with new content relating to *Mr. Lunch*.



The exhibition is a look at Seibold's unique (and often quirky) style, his artistic process, and the multiple sources from which he draws ideas. Inspired by Miroslav Sasek's *This Is* series, Snoopy and Woodstock, and other illustrations, including Japanese cartoons, Seibold's pages are chock full of fun and offbeat images. Characterized as a postmodern children's book series with a contemporary look and feel, the *Mr. Lunch* books have meandering plots. While Seibold often includes elements of social critique, the stories do not contain clear morals or messages, as do many children's books. Described by *The Simpsons* creator Matt Groening as "simple and easy on the eyes, but also intricate and full of sneaky little details that you can wade into if you wish," the exhibition offers large-scale images from the books, inviting visitors to observe and discover these details in full color.



### **Why The CJM? Why Children's Literature? Why J. Otto Seibold?**

Since its reopening in the Yerba Buena Neighborhood in June 2008, The Contemporary Jewish Museum has showcased a series of exhibitions of beloved authors and illustrators of children's books. Ranging from Maurice Sendak to Ezra Jack Keats to J. Otto Seibold, these author/illustrators represent a diversity of personal experiences and artistic styles. The works of these author/illustrators address the universal themes of childhood—the struggles of growing up, the challenges of being "different," finding one's way in the world—as well as themes specific to Jewish and immigrant communities. These exhibitions have attracted tens of thousands of school children and their families to The Museum, engaging them in reading, writing, drawing, and bookmaking in their homes and in their classrooms.

Jewish tradition holds books, education, and literacy at its core. Often referred to as "the people of the book," the Jewish people consider reading, study, discussion, and interpretation to be key values, worthy of passing on from generation to generation. The Contemporary Jewish Museum carries on this tradition with its series of exhibitions featuring the work of acclaimed authors and illustrators of a variety of backgrounds. Bay Area-based author and illustrator J. Otto Seibold shares The CJM's values, and demonstrates The Museum's ongoing

commitment to supporting artists and to presenting exhibitions that inspire a love of reading, education, and learning.

### **Preparing for Your Visit**

#### **What to expect on your tour:**

*J. Otto Seibold and Mr. Lunch* features original sketches, dummy books, notebooks, and other source material, large-scale illustrations from Seibold's books, as well as *Mr. Lunch*-inspired set-pieces designed for interaction and play. On your guided tour, Museum Educators will introduce you to The Contemporary Jewish Museum, then lead your group through the exhibition, stopping at 6–8 artworks in the gallery. Tours highlight the elements of a story, the process of creating and illustrating books, and Seibold's process and unique artistic style. Students will also take home an exhibition passport. All tours at The Contemporary Jewish Museum are interactive—student voices, ideas, and interpretations are a primary part of the tour experience!

As you prepare for your visit, please remind your students of the following:

- Please refrain from eating or drinking in the gallery.
- Our Museum Educators love it when students wear nametags!
- Photography *is* allowed in the *Mr. Lunch* gallery.
- You are welcome to take notes or sketch in the gallery, however we request that you use pencil rather than pen.
- Use your eyes and ears (but not your hands) to experience the artwork.
- Have fun!

## **Questions to Guide Your Experience with J. Otto Seibold and Mr. Lunch**

*These questions can be used to guide a discussion prior to, during, or after your Museum visit.*

### **Authors and Illustrators**

- What does an author do? What does an illustrator do?
- How does an artist or illustrator get inspiration for creating a book? Where do you think Seibold may have gotten his inspiration?

### **Seibold's Artistic Style**

- Look at a page or two from a J. Otto Seibold book. How would you describe his style? How is it different from other children's book illustrations? For example, compare Seibold's art to the work of Maurice Sendak or Arnold Lobel. How does the style differ? Seibold created his illustrations on the computer—can you tell this by looking?
- Take a look at another page from a Seibold book. How would you describe the composition (the way the art and text are arranged on the page)? How realistic is it? What story do the images tell? How does Seibold combine images and words on the page? How is this similar to or different from other books you've read?
- What do you notice about Seibold's characters? Why do you think he chose to use animals as the main characters in most of his books? How do these animal characters differ from the animals featured in the *Frog and Toad* series?

### **Artists and Inspiration**

- J. Otto Seibold talks about getting ideas for his books from many sources, from his own life to cartoons like Snoopy and Woodstock to books like Miroslav Sasek's *This Is* series and *Curious George*. Sometimes Seibold even says he copied directly from another source! You can read more about these inspirations here:  
[ronniesawesomelist.com/blog/jottoseibold](http://ronniesawesomelist.com/blog/jottoseibold)

Take a look at some of these sources of inspiration and see if you can tell how they influenced him. What do you think about "copying" ideas (known as "appropriation" in the art world)? Where do you get your ideas? How do the ideas of others influence you?

**Try it out!**

- See if you can create a story you can tell on a single page. Who are the characters? What are they doing? How will you combine text and pictures? Use materials you can find in the classroom or at home, such as paper, colored pencils, magazines for collage, or Sharpies.

## **J. Otto Seibold and Mr. Lunch: Exhibition Text**

### **INTRODUCTION**

By Matt Groening

I discovered *Mr. Lunch Takes a Plane Ride* in 1993 and flipped out. As a befuddled dad with two young toddlers I was always on the lookout for books that 1) they liked, and 2) I could stand—which is a tall order in the chewable kids'-books category. Mr. Lunch, the simply rendered but somehow super-expressive dot-eyed, bird-chasing doggy, became a household favorite. The 1994 follow-up, *Mr. Lunch Borrows a Canoe*, and *Free Lunch* (1996) continued the friendly-but-not-cute, cute-but-not-cutesy, smart-but-not-smirky story of Mr. Lunch and his bird pal Ambrose. My boys loved it, and so did I. The art, by the mysterious-sounding J. Otto Seibold, seemed to be computerized without being computery, in that the digital magic wand of the artist was almost invisible. It turns out not only was J. Otto Seibold a computer pioneer in children's books, he has also been consistently brilliant at it for more than two decades. At a glance, the work is simple and easy on the eyes, but also intricate and full of sneaky little details that you can wade into if you wish. J. Otto Seibold has somehow been able to inject the digital medium with the wholesome, seemingly hand-drawn style of the best children's books. Let's face it, most computer art (and books and animation and dancing logos) are cold and creepy, but not Mr. Lunch. How often can you look at a piece of computer art and sweetly go "Aww?" Thank you, J. Otto Seibold!

### **MR. LUNCH TAKES A PLANE RIDE**

I had been wanting to use my success as an illustrator for non-commercial purposes. One of the benefits of being able to continue to publish is that I didn't have to draw things for other people's use to pay for life's necessities. In the course of creating the book in 1992 in New York City, my first child was born and my commitment to children's books took on a real meaning.

Speaking of real, Mr. Lunch was a real Jack Russell terrier, who daily proved his skill and honor when chasing birds in the park near our home. The story is also from life. We took a flight back to San Francisco and Mr. Lunch was sedated and put in the cargo compartment of the plane. So, to compensate for my fear of his actual experience, I made up a story that had unintended consequences for a well intended character, a theme throughout all three books.

Though Mr. Lunch is based on a real dog named Mr. Lunch (after a man I met in Spain who served me a mid-day sardine meal in his cave near the ocean!), I was also very aware of the other white dog and bird team that was a very dominant presence in the cartoon animal market. I'm talking about Snoopy and Woodstock who I felt had become very commercialized.

## MR. LUNCH BORROWS A CANOE

Because *Plane Ride* had been enough of a success, I was offered a chance to do another book with Viking and my lovely editor Regina Hayes. I was happy to be with the publisher of Lane Smith, Maira Kalman, and Richard McGuire. It was a unique moment in children's publishing where smart contemporary stories and illustration styles were seen as commercially viable. This was before the internet wave crested and "everything" became "cool."

Having based *Plane Ride* on real events and characters, I thought I would continue the same idea, but this time I wanted to choose the event. I thought of the idea of Mr. Lunch "borrowing" a canoe as a joke version of his "taking" a plane ride. I thought I would go to Venice, Italy, where Mr. Lunch ends up, and do the art for the book up close and documentary style. The idea of being on location in a city I had already visited was inspired by my favorite, and at the time forgotten and since rediscovered, children's book hero, Miroslav Sasek! He was the creator of the "This Is" series of books made in the 1960s and 70s. He would travel to different major cities and make books explaining where he was by being there. Really great books! When I began to enact this fantastic plan of mine I found out the other reason "borrowing" was a key word in the title. Though *Plane Ride* had critical success, it didn't make much money. I had a new baby and the cost of living in New York City. . . and there was in fact no way I was going to Venice to make this book. So, I drew my impressions of Venice from photo books at Barnes & Noble down the street.

*Canoe* is also the introduction of the character "the Bird Seed Company's president"—a blue elephant. There is a lot of commercial structure to the narratives in the books: offices, employees, bosses, and presidents. . . I think it has a relationship to the books I read as a child that were kind-of "these are the people of your town" exercises: the fireman, the mayor. I'm not a proponent of corporate structures (ask my friends!) but I like to employ them in my stories because in its deadpan manner and accepted structure, it becomes absurd when animals other than humans do it.

I also like the demonstration of the idea "if you borrow something, return it in better shape than you started with." Mr. Lunch destroys the canoe in order to make it usable for the elephant upon its return. Also, the line "the plaza was clean and no dirt could be seen" was paraphrased from a Meat Puppets song called "Plateau." There are many examples of borrowing in *Mr. Lunch Borrows a Canoe*, words and pictures that I copied (honorably and with respect!) and included in the book.



## FREE LUNCH

*Free Lunch* was created in San Francisco, the city I lived in before Manhattan and the area I had spent my entire life prior. My previous book was a different set of characters (except Quincy, the guy) titled *Monkey Business*, the story of the first monkey in space's life after his history-making space work.

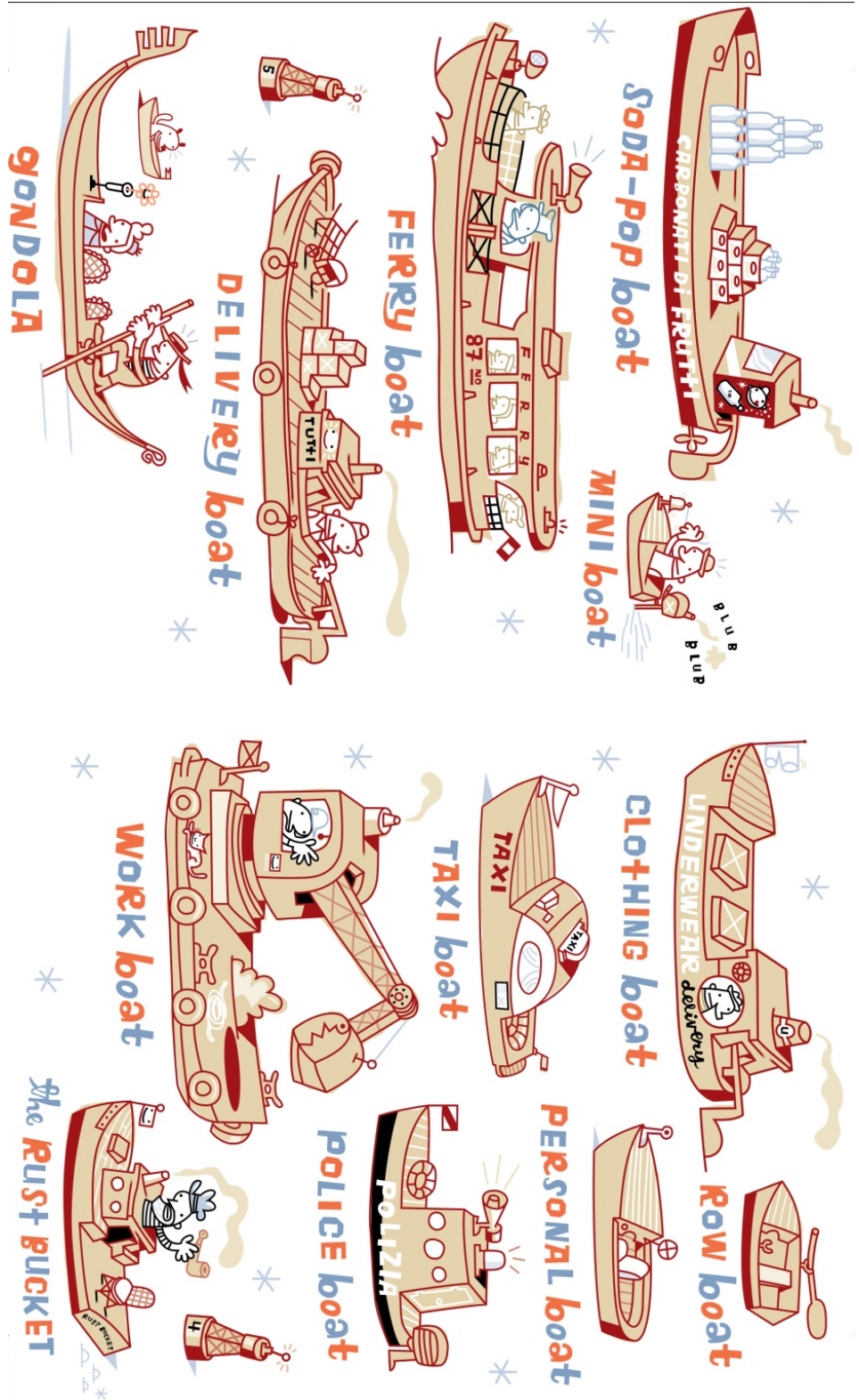
The first idea for *Free Lunch* was in response to something I'd heard all my life. . . "there's no such thing as a. . . ." Since there was "no such thing," I decided to create one. At the time the news was dominated by a major trial of a former football player and rental-car spokesman. I noticed that kids were hearing about it through the conversation of adults. I thought about characters from children's literature going to jail. Though many fables involve imprisonment, the only modern example I could think of was *Curious George*. As a result I copied the page from *The Original Curious George* to depict Mr. Lunch's arrest and incarceration.

Also, the Elephant Bird Seed Company had changed ownership to a "bad elephant." I think that was a reflection of the downsizing/corporate atmosphere also happening in 1995. Goodness, badness, justice, and injustice, even principled stands according to the "bakers code" are all covered in the simple tale of a dog trying to do things right.

Exhibition Images



J. Otto Seibold, "... and out to the airport" from *Mr. Lunch Takes a Plane Ride*, n.d. Vector illustration, dimensions variable. J. Otto Seibold and Mr. Lunch. On view November 20, 2014–March 8, 2015. The Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco.



J. Otto Seibold, "Soda Pop Boat" from *Mr. Lunch Takes Borrows a Canoe*, n.d. Vector illustration, dimensions variable. J. Otto Seibold and Mr. Lunch. On view November 20, 2014–March 8, 2015. The Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco.





J. Otto Seibold, "Mr. Lunch was surprised. . ." from *Free Lunch*, n.d. Vector illustration, dimensions variable. *J. Otto Seibold and Mr. Lunch*. On view November 20, 2014–March 8, 2015. The Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco.



J. Otto Seibold, "Venice." from *Mr. Lunch Borrows a Canoe*, n.d. Vector illustration, dimensions variable. J. Otto Seibold and Mr. Lunch. On view November 20, 2014–March 8, 2015. The Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco.

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