

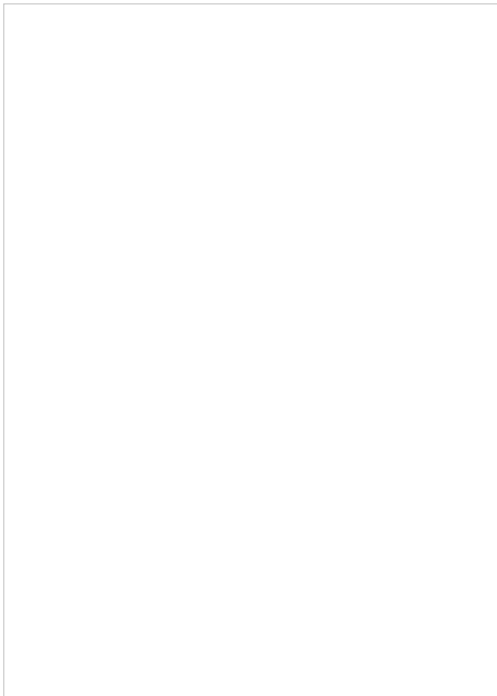
Look at the Bigger Picture

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Can Alexander Larman tempt voracious collectors to stray from plain text, and into the colourful world of illustrated books?

Alexander Larman

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WATKINS-PITCHFORD, D.J.

The Whopper, 1967. available at £950 from Ashton Rare Books

When you think of ‘the Golden Age of children’s illustration’, which artists come to mind? The estimable likes of Quentin Blake and Axel Scheffler are perennially popular today, and in the middle of the twentieth century, everyone from Edward Ardizzone to DJ ‘BB’ Watkins-Pitchford produced extraordinarily interesting, brilliant work. To purchase a signed copy of BB’s *The Whopper* in its original dustwrapper will currently cost you around £950 from Ashton Rare Books, and The Bookshop on the Heath has BB’s own copy of *The Countryman’s Bedside Book* on offer at the moment, for a comparatively trifling £275.



RACKHAM, Arthur
Rip Van Winkle Heinemann, 1905. Jonker's Rare Books

But in order to understand the true 'Golden Age' of the medium, you have to go back to the beginning of the century to the Edwardian era, at a time when artists from Arthur Rackham to Kay Nielsen were renowned for their mastery of form, colour and subject. Although the subjects dealt with might seem juvenile, there is absolutely nothing childish about the books that they illustrated – nor the prices that the titles command today, especially the rare signed limited editions that are eagerly sought-after by collectors.

One man who has been dealing in Golden Age children's books since he began his career is Christiaan Jonkers, proprietor of Jonkers Rare Books in Henley-on-Thames. For Jonkers, it's easy to say why the books became so successful, from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards. 'It coincided with the beginning of mainstream colour printing. The four-colour process (where the impressions of four electronically engraved printing plates each printing a single colour, red, green, blue and black are superimposed to produce a multicoloured image) meant it became commercially viable to reproduce detailed watercolour paintings. Beforehand, colour was either added by hand using a stencil process or by lithography, both of which were expensive and time consuming and generally reserved for the grandest natural history books.'



DETMOLD, Edward

Illustration from *The Arabian Nights*, 1924 available at David Brass Rare Books

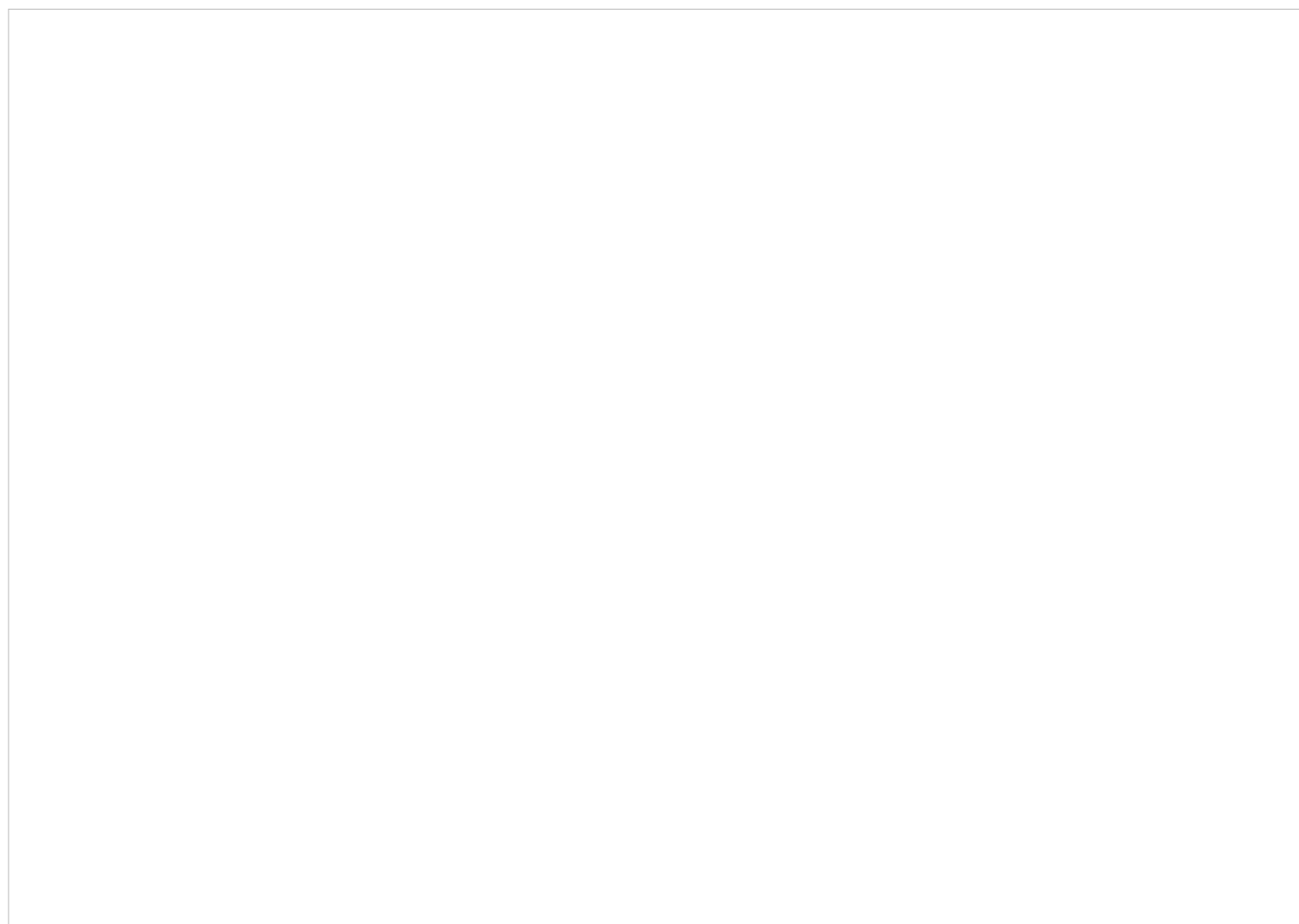
This meant that artists of great genius could emerge, but for Jonkers, there is one figure who is *primus inter pares*. 'Arthur Rackham is the most prolific of the golden age illustrators and therefore the best known and most widely regarded. It was his illustrations to *Rip Van Winkle* in 1905 which set the template for illustrated books of this period and he continued working until his death in 1939.' Nonetheless, Jonkers also singles out other artists with distinctive styles. 'The most notable of these is probably Kay Nielsen, a Danish artist who moved to London and later to California. His work is very stylised and inventive with a strong fantasy element. In later life, he worked for Disney and contributed some of the

scenes to Fantasia.’

When it comes to lesser-known figures, Jonkers considers Edward Detmold underrated- ‘he is less well known than he should be. He trained as a zoologist so his animal studies are very precise, but he also had a sparkling use of colour, which is evident in his work for *The Arabian Nights* and *Aesop’s Fables*’ – and he has his own soft spot for a lesser-known artist. ‘I particularly enjoy Harry Rountree’s rendition of *Alice in Wonderland*. It differs from most of the grand illustrated books of the period in that the book is printed on coated paper throughout so there are illustrations on virtually every page, interspersed with the text.’

These illustrators’ most famous works were sold in limited edition formats, which are now hugely desirable. As Jonkers explains, ‘Although even in their standard format, these books are very much a deluxe production, the limited editions take this a stage further: they are usually on larger, handmade paper, bound in vellum and signed by the illustrator. There is also the exclusivity of knowing there are only a small number (usually a few hundred) of copies produced.’ The prices are therefore commensurately high, but, as Jonkers notes, condition is vital. ‘It has a significant impact on the value of these books. They are produced as objects of beauty so being damaged or in rotten condition rather defeats their purpose. As booksellers, one of our most important services to our customers is to ensure that they are buying the best available copies of these books. All the books we sell have been carefully checked for any repairs and that they have all the requisite illustrations in an undamaged state.’

Jonkers is in the enviable position of being the go-to bookseller for the original watercolour artwork from these books. He explains that ‘We usually have examples by most of the major illustrators for sale. We follow similar principles in selecting artwork to buy as we do with our books, selecting only the best examples from each illustrator’s range. The price depends on a number of factors: illustrators, subject matter, and quality of work being the most significant. A small Rackham drawing might be £2000, whereas a full-size watercolour would start at about £10,000 but the choicest examples might be in excess of £100,000.’ Not all the work is so bank-breaking, however; Jonkers says that ‘Some lesser known illustrators work can be had from £500 upwards.’



ROUNTREE, Harry *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*
Nelson, 1908. Jonker's Rare Books

Christmas is, of course, a traditional time for these books to be given as gifts; as Jonkers points out, ‘These books were originally timed to be released for the Christmas market and were sold as ‘Christmas Gift Books’. It is easy to see why they make such good gifts and will appeal to all book lovers, not just ardent collectors. That said, we sell a steady stream of these books throughout the year.’ And there are also times when something really unique comes in, which will be snapped up by the eager collector. ‘Occasionally, we find books which have had an original drawing added by the illustrator, making them unique and particularly special. Usually these are a small pen and ink doodle; however some years ago we had the limited edition of *Alice in Wonderland* with Rackham’s illustrations, in which he had drawn a full page in watercolour of Alice and the Queen of Hearts playing croquet. That was very special indeed.’

So if you fancied a Christmas present to remember, get thee to Henley, forthwith. Whatever you buy is likely to be wonderful, beautiful and unique

– and, if you're willing to spend the money, might even contain its own artistic delights, too.