



Photos by Sarah Jenness

In Chapters: Reflections on the Artist Tomie dePaola

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Mary Lou Hoyt, AIL Member

On November 7, 2024, at the Niblack Black Box Theatre at Colby-Sawyer College, AIL members and other community residents were treated to a very special Community Spotlight program, In Chapters: Reflections on the Artist Tomie dePaola. Artist Bruce McColl, Director of Engagement at the Currier Museum in Manchester, presented along with Sherry Litwack, dePaola's Curator of Museum Exhibitions and Art Sales Representative.

The presentation began with a brief history of Tomie's family, which was of Irish and Italian descent. His paternal grandparents were originally from Calabria, Italy, the setting of one of his most popular books, *Strega Nona*. Tomie lived and worked in his home and studio in New Hampshire, which is attached to a 200-year-old barn. The presentation included pictures of his studio, library, and living room inspired by a chapel he had visited. Tomie was quoted as saying his home "was a dream come true," an inspiration to him every day. Incorporated were the influences he felt from Old and New Mexico and chapels and cathedrals in Europe.

Sherry Litwack, a dear friend of Tomie for over 35 years, chose a format of "chapters" to share her experiences and work with the artist. She reflected on how his art was infused into all aspects of his life as an artist and a person, noting how art not only shaped Tomie as a person, but it also shaped how he lived. She opened by quoting a favorite expression of Tomie's, "Be ready when the luck happens." Sherry shared the many adventures they had traveling to many museums and exhibitions of Tomie's and other famous artists' work. She mentioned the Art Institute of Chicago and the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe, among others. She spoke of the influence of artists such as Georgia O'Keeffe and T.C. Cannon on Tomie, as well as the spiritual aspects of his life which influenced his work. Sherry explained how use of color and the simplicity in his illustrations was especially evident in his book, *Mary Had a Little Lamb*.

Bruce McColl knew Tomie for a much shorter period of time but described being influenced by his talents. His presentation focused on the work Tomie did at the Currier Museum introducing children to art and illustrating. They collaborated on art

camp experiences which were available to all children interested in attending because of generous scholarships and community support. Tomie had many exhibitions at the Currier including *Beyond Words* with David Carroll and Beth Krommes. He donated many of his works to the Currier which established the Tomie de Paola Art Education Fund in support of art education for young people.

One of the highest honors awarded to Tomie de Paola was a commissioned USPS forever stamp which was unveiled at the Currier. The stamp depicts a scene from *Strega Nona*. Bruce McColl also mentioned Tomie's simplicity, color usage and his spirituality. He noted that Tomie admired and was influenced by the artist Matisse. This influence was evident in his book *Quiet*, in which he uses simple illustrations and story to encourage children to be quiet and reflective and to be comfortable in those moments.

To conclude the program, Sherry and Bruce read the last unpublished book of Tomie's, *Where Are You Brontë?* which was his last gift encouraging us all to not be afraid of passing or losing a wonderful pet. Brontë was Tomie's beloved Airedale dog. Tomie's hope was always "to help parents with their children, to explain life's events through pictures and simple words, love and loss."

How fortunate we were to have such a close and personal look at Tomie de Paola through the eyes of two talented friends who are artists themselves. They brought wonderful insight into this prolific writer, artist, and illustrator who created more than 260 books and received many honors and prestigious awards. To quote Bruce McColl, "Tomie was a dreamer and storyteller with simple beautiful illustrations. He cared about the next generation."

Sherry also expressed her appreciation for Tomie: "How lucky we were to have known Tomie the person and to share his gifts through writings, illustrating and painting."

To honor Tomie's legacy, the Currier Museum has established the Tomie dePaola Art Education Fund. [Read more about it here.](#)

Community Spotlight events highlight community connections, AIL partnerships, and lifelong learning experiences. If you have an idea or topic that you would like to share, [please click here.](#)

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