



## VOJTECH KUBAŠTA'S MARVELLOUS MOVABLE BOOKS

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**I**N FALL 2017, Graham Bradshaw, my colleague in Collection Development, asked for my opinion about purchasing several movable books by the Czech artist Vojtech Kubašta (1914–1992). ‘Movable books, what are they?’ I asked myself. North American children and parents know movable or mechanical books as pop-ups. These volumes use paper-engineering—flaps, folds, levers, and sliding tabs—to amaze, amuse, and surprise us, transforming static pages into movable three-dimensional objects. I was not sure of what to expect from this purchase, but having curated an exhibition on Czech book design in 2015, I knew that the illustrations would undoubtedly be striking and fit with the Fisher Library’s strengths in typographic design. Sure enough, when the five Kubašta books arrived from local book dealer Jason Rovito, several middle-aged librarians immediately delighted in the imaginative physical workings of this artist’s paper-engineered designs.

We follow the perilous adventure of Hansel and Gretel deep into the woods and their escape from the clutches of the cannibalistic witch in her confectionary cottage through Kubašta’s eight pop-up spreads. Several of the pages include movable elements. A tab on the cover makes the children appear and disappear, and, on another page, you pull a tab to help them shove the witch into the fiery oven. Another book visually guides us from the evil fairy’s curse through to the awakening of Sleeping Beauty by the kiss of the Prince. A third pop-up book displays the attractions of the historic Viennese Wurstelprater, such as its famous giant Ferris wheel (think *Third Man* with Orson Wells), merry-go-rounds, swan boats, and puppet theatre, while a fourth one takes us through the escapades of Jolly Jim. A favourite for us all is following the boys Tip and Top, with their dog Tap, as they go flying in a fifth volume. We see them viewing a hot-air balloon show, soaring in their own jet planes,

and controlling a jumbo jet on the runway from an air-traffic control centre. The movable elements include a rotating altimeter, propeller, and blades, a ‘trembling’ sky, and a removable paper airplane. The five recent purchases join Kubašta’s pop-up of *Alice in Wonderland* that is a part of the Fisher Library’s Lewis Carroll Collection (donated by Joseph Brabant and Nicholas Maes in 1997).

Vojtech Kubašta’s books are not merely marvels of illustration and playful paper design but are fine examples of the printed book. All the physical and sensory elements of the book—the text, design, illustrations, animations, etc.—create a unified whole. Using skills in geometry developed from his architectural studies, Kubašta designed each book as a sort of, in his daughter Dagmar’s words, ‘small puppet theatre’. With the book held lengthwise at a right angle, each page unfolds onto a stage set. The top half is the intricate layered scenery, with the characters

**OPENING PAGE:** Vojtech Kubašta's *Hansel and Gretel*, written in German. **BELOW:** Pop up from a book in French in which Tip and Top go flying, and a scene from the historic Viennese *Wurstelprater*.

of the story in the foreground, cut into a slant, so that the three-dimensional element can extend over the page's edge, while at the bottom runs the text, parallel to the spine. The books generally have either six or eight pages and share the same dimensions (20.5 x 26.5 centimetres). The ingenuity of Kubašta's design is that the theatre with its scenery, puppet-like figures, and props can fold flat and be stored on a bookshelf, only to magically reappear with each rereading.

Kubašta's pop-up books draw not only from the tradition of Czech puppet theatre and Western popular culture, but also are part of print history. Book historians describe how the mechanical book grew out of early scientific and mathematical works, dating as far back as the thirteenth century. Some of these early works contained turning disks, or *volvelles* (from the Medieval Latin term meaning *to turn*), for astronomical, geographic, or numerical calculations. However, the movable book did not flourish until the birth of industrial printing in the late nineteenth century. The goal was to instruct and entertain upper-class children. Works ranged from studies of anatomy, with each foldout panel showing a particular system of the human body, to speaking picture books elucidating animal sounds, and from fairy tales to nativity scenes. The pop-up publishing industry collapsed after the First World War owing to the scarcity of paper, labour, and access to printing presses, and did not truly thrive again until Kubašta mastered the form following the Second World War.

Vojtech Kubašta was born in Vienna and raised in Prague. He completed studies in architecture and civil engineering in 1938, and then, with the arrival and occupation of Bohemia and Moravia by the Nazis, turned to advertising graphics and book illustration in the early to mid-1940s. He taught at the Rotter School of Graphic Design, and after its closure in 1944, produced advertising material and household objects for the plastics plant Baklax. Around this same time, Kubašta began to illustrate a large number of children's books for the publishing house of Josef Doležal, including a series of books by Cenek Sovák (1902–1982), a noted puppet-theatre director. Through Doležal, Kubašta met the publisher Otakar Štorch-Marien (1897–1974). For him, he

created portfolios of hand-coloured lithographs (1943–1945) and postcards (1947) of Prague, and illustrated Štorch-Marien's *Aventinum*



publishing house's series of Anglo-American literature. The Gerstein Science Information Centre and Fisher Library hold two wartime

books with book jackets and title vignettes by Kubašta. The first is Jan Obenberger's seasonal entomological history of Czechoslovakia (*Červený Kostelec: Doležal, 1943*). The second is a re-edition of Božena Němcová's *Babička*, a fictionalized retelling of the author's childhood in northeastern Bohemia in the 1820s through the trope of a saintly grandmother who comes to live with her daughter and grandchildren (Prague: Atlas, 1944). Both volumes are part of the Jaroslav Reichl collection donated by Carl Alexander in 2012.

In 1948, the Communist Party came to power in Czechoslovakia. The Party's Ministry of Information nationalized the country's publishing industry and shut down hundreds of publishing houses. Kubašta sought work elsewhere and returned to advertising. He produced three-dimensional cards to help sell Czech consumer products abroad, such as Pilsner Urquell beer, porcelain, light bulbs, radios, and sewing machines. In addition, Kubašta worked for Sloutour, the Slovakian travel agency, creating for them tourist posters and souvenir booklets using movable and pop-up elements. These promotional materials were the first time he used three-dimensionality for commercial purposes. Yet, beginning in the mid-1950s, he began to apply his engineering, design, and art skills towards creating pop-up books of traditional fairy tales and children's stories. The Czechoslovakian publishing house Artia, a state-run import-export agency, produced his works, and Bancroft and Company (Publishers) of London, owned by a Jewish-émigré banker from Prague, marketed them abroad. Kubašta's books were assembled by hand by hundreds of women in two Czechoslovakian factories, and they were sold to children abroad (largely core European countries). The books were meant, as his daughter, Dagmar Kubaštová Vrkljan, recalls 'only for capitalist children and would serve to corrupt the taste of socialist children.' They made Artia millions in Western currency.

Altogether, more than three hundred titles of Kubašta's titles were published in three dozen language over three decades. Over time, tens of millions of children have entered into Kubašta's remarkable world of stories and magical pop-up illustrations. We invite researchers and visitors to join them.