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BOOKSHELF

Children's Books: Flora as Fauna

Arranging pressed ferns, grasses and flower petals to depict butterflies, birds and a dainty field mouse.

By *Meghan Cox Gurdon*

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In the era of digital illustration, the computer has become as ordinary a tool as the charcoal pencil or the watercolor paintbrush, and amazing visual effects have become almost commonplace. This reality makes Helen Ahpornsiri's work in **"Drawn From Nature" (Big Picture, 60 pages, \$22)** all the more astonishing, for every image in this picture book about the seasons is composed of plants and flowers.

Ms. Ahpornsiri has arranged pressed ferns, grasses and flower petals in the shapes of birds, butterflies and mammals, intricate translucent designs that bring to mind the finer sort of mosaic. Here is a tiny field mouse, his dainty tail wrapped around the stalk of an even daintier poppy; here a resplendent heron, the curve of his neck formed by the arch of a fern. Because the artist is working with dried vegetation, her palette of faded greens, golds, reds and blues is dictated by nature. With informative nonfiction text and elegant, sincere illustrations, the book invites children ages 6-9 to marvel at the beauty of natural things.

The dazzling colors of flowers so captivated the 20th-century fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli that, as a little girl, she once filled her ears, mouth and nose with flower seeds. "To have a face covered with flowers like a heavenly garden would indeed be a wonderful thing!" Schiaparelli (1890-1973) wrote of the incident, in a line that Kyo Maclear includes in her picture-book biography of the aristocratic Italian-born couturier, **"Bloom: A Story of Fashion Designer Elsa Schiaparelli" (Harper, 40 pages, \$17.99)**.



PHOTO: HARPER

As the story goes, the poor child soon felt horribly sick. "It takes two doctors to extract all the seeds," Ms. Maclear writes, speaking for her subject. "My plan flops but a different kind of seed is planted . . . a seed of wild imagination." Julie Morstad's flower-decked pictures (see above) of Schiap, as she was later known, use lots of shocking pink. Young readers ages 4-8 who are accustomed to the color may be surprised to learn that Schiaparelli invented it. Based in Paris, the daring designer also collaborated with the avant-garde artists of her time. With

Salvador Dalí, for instance, she created a hat in the shape of a lamb chop and an evening dress adorned with a lobster.

Schiaparelli's bold, showy pieces had their antithesis in the dark, slim designs of her contemporary and archrival, Coco Chanel. "Coco detested Schiap and bitterly referred to her as 'that Italian who's making clothes,' " writes Susan Goldman Rubin in **"Coco Chanel: Pearls, Perfume, and the Little Black Dress (Abrams, 133 pages, \$18.99)**, a biography for readers ages 12 and older of the Frenchwoman whose name remains a watchword for chic. Schiap returned the dislike, calling Chanel (1883-1971) "that dreary little bourgeoisie."

It was an epithet that struck at a point of vulnerability: Though after her success Chanel moved in wealthy and high-born circles, she had come into the world illegitimate and penniless and was educated by nuns as a charity case. Ms. Rubin's straightforward account of the couturier's life and work does not shy away from some of Chanel's less attractive qualities—her temper, her anti-Semitism, her propensity to tell lies—even as she creates a compelling picture of the imagination and industry that made Coco Chanel so influential. The distinctive style that she developed more than a century ago, when she started swiping pieces from her boyfriend's closet and recutting them to suit herself, looks as smart and modern today as it did then. "You have a style when everyone on the street is dressed like you," Chanel once said. "I achieved this."

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