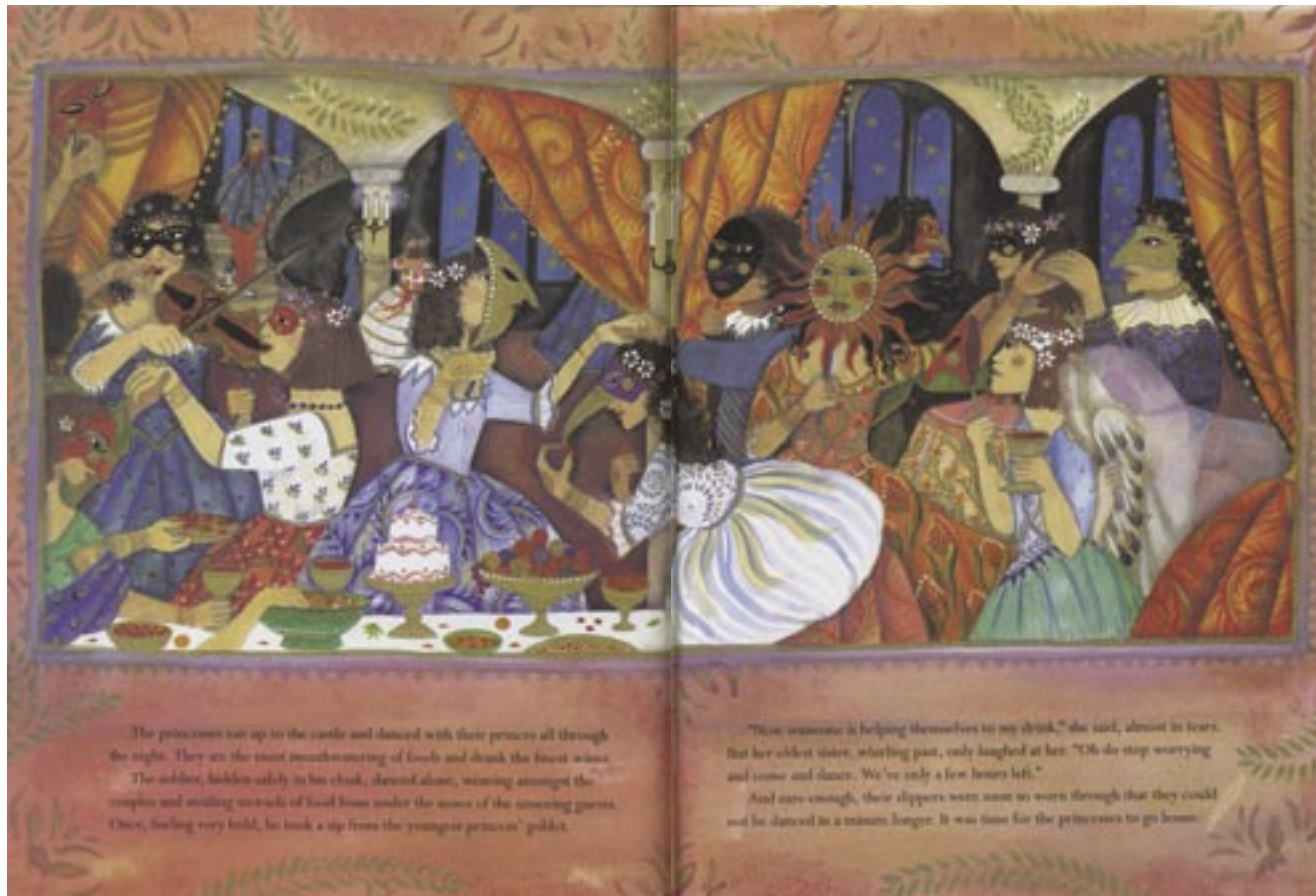


# Arabian LIGHTS

Jane Ray's images evoke the colours, light and warmth of Middle Eastern souks and are often intensely decorated with ornate borders and gold. Caroline Stockwell asks her where she finds inspiration in the cooler atmosphere of north London

**N**ot many people enjoy Monday mornings, but Jane Ray does – which is just as well given that, when I meet her, she has five different projects under way. A glance round any children's bookshop provides ample evidence of her extensive output and enduring popularity. The workload, she insists, is "no hardship. I love what I do." So do many other people. "Faultless", "magical", "luminous" and "vibrant" are among the adjectives that critics have used to describe her work.

Ray's earliest work, as a freelance card designer for Roger La Borde cards, began just as the fashion for cards and posters based on the work of Edwardian artists, such as Arthur Rackham and Charles Robinson, that had enjoyed a revival in the 1970s, began to wane. After a surfeit of elves and goblins (as well as the ubiquitous puppies-in-a-basket designs that appeared everywhere



**1 and 2**  
**The Twelve Dancing Princesses** (Orchard Books, 1996)

in the 1970s), Ray's card designs stood out. Her style seemed instead to follow a trend established by Gallery Five, where artists such as Jan Pieńkowski were moving away from these ethereal and sentimental themes.

Ray's style was, and is, unmistakable. Her use of shapes and vibrant hues, described by the *Times Educational Supplement* recently as an "exuberant patterning and celebration of colour", is influenced by the Mediterranean and Middle East. It was her borders, in particular, that made her card designs so special: intricate, but not busy; decorative, but enhancing, rather than detracting from, the main image. Many of her designs in the early 1980s focused on urban scenes, but ones that were decidedly more exotic than those to be found in London. They showed cities in India and views of Venice – a plethora of softly shaded minarets, domed roofs and towers rising from hillside towns. The skies behind them were as sultry as an Andalusian sunset. There were gold-tinged palaces and palm-lined walkways

with perspectives that drew on her student years studying ceramics at Middlesex University.

I bought card after card at a time when I yearned to travel. The first night I looked out on Jaffa, its orange trees bathed in moonlight, it looked to me like one of Ray's cards, mysterious and magical.

The exotic images led me to assume that Ray travelled widely for her inspiration. Her illustrations include Venetian-style masks, usually on the faces of her villains. "The unknown is always more scary than the known, and masks are frightening things anyway," she says. In Oscar Wilde's fairy tale *The Happy Prince* (Orchard Books, 1994), Ray shows the prince visiting sarcophagi and ancient hieroglyphics in Egypt, and she continues to draw on Middle Eastern traditions in tales from the *Bible* and books such as the

Folio Society's *Myths of the Near East* and *The Arabian Nights*.

In fact, one of Ray's most important sources of inspiration is the British Museum, a short journey from where she lives in north London. She also cites trips on buses, watching people in cafés and her comprehensive library of picture and photographic books, as well as input from her three children. Her eldest daughter considerably suggested putting sticking plasters on the feet of *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* and, in the formative days of *Can*

**3**  
One of Ray's greetings cards published by Roger La Borde





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*You Catch a Mermaid?* (Orchard Books, 2003), the first book that Ray wrote as well as illustrated, all three daughters helped her to create sand mermaids on the beach and posed for her sketches. This book is, she says, “a compost heap of ideas” stitched together by her love of Scottish folk stories and folk art. “It excites me, the things people make for their own pleasure,” she explains.

When it comes to other illustrators, Ray cites Pieńkowski as one of her earliest sources of inspiration, along with Beatrix Potter and Brian Wildsmith’s version of *Mother Goose*. “I’m still looking at those pictures,” she says. Pieńkowski’s influence can be seen in some of the filigree-fine silhouettes that recall the illustrations he created for Joan Aiken’s *The Kingdom Under the Sea* (Jonathan Cape, 1971). Posters of its front cover jostled for space with the Alphonse Mucha prints in many girls’ bedrooms when Ray was a teenager.

The intricate line work in Potter’s watercolours is reflected in Ray’s meticulous attention to detail: the intricate pattern on a princess’s skirt; the drape of a brocade curtain; flora and fauna in a forest. She cites Wildsmith’s



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“wonderful use of colour and new printing techniques” as having been a big influence on her work. Like him, she has produced a range of illustrated *Bible* stories, with *In the Beginning*, *Noah’s Ark*, *The Story of Christmas*, *The Story of Creation* (all Orchard Books) and, more recently, *Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden*, produced for the Eden Project (Transworld, 2004). Ray’s images bring these stories to new readers embellished with rich lilacs and blues, as colourful as stained-glass windows. Like Wildsmith, she also uses gold extravagantly in her work, which adds to the ecclesiastical look of the Biblical stories. Her version of *The Story of Christmas* (1994) does more than create a new version of the same age-old images – it even includes a picture of a breastfeeding Madonna.

The themes of Ray’s work are eclectic. Alongside the *Bible* stories are fairy tales, interpretations of poetry and opera plots. Much of this work was created in a sunny room upstairs in her home, but recently a summerhouse, “lifted in by crane” and planted in the garden, has become her studio. There are similarities with the gingerbread house in *Hansel and Gretel*, a story that Ray has illus-



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4 The story of Bamsi Beyrek, from *Myths of the Near East*, Folio Society, 2003

5 The Jewish legend of Lilith, from *Myths of the Near East*, Folio Society, 2003

6 An Egyptian mummy in a pyramid appears as part of the travels of *The Happy Prince* (Orchard Books, 1994)



7  
Greetings card

8  
The Anzu bird in  
*Lugalbanda: The Boy  
Who Got Caught  
up in a War* (Walker  
Books, 2006)

9  
The Kadi and the  
Ass's Foal from  
*The Arabian Nights*  
(Vol 5), The Folio  
Society, 2003



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Ray's use of shapes and vibrant hues are an 'exuberant patterning and celebration of colour' influenced by the Mediterranean and Middle East



trated twice – once in her own version and once for a selection of 10 Grimms' fairy tales, retold by Berlie Doherty (both Walker Books). The former owes more than a nod to old Russian editions of fairy tales, its pages filled with shawl-enveloped women, greatcoated, bearded men and an austere northern forest.

In her studio, Ray pins postcards to the wall beside her worktable "that reflect what I am working on". They provide inspiration and help her to focus. There is a picture of *The Little Prince*, some

"ancient Sumerian stuff", a child's picture and several images of the moon. The bookshelves contain manuals, photographic books, a copy of *Longman's Animal Encyclopaedia* ("a present for my 20th birthday from my mother") and books by other artists present and past. The table, well lit by a window above, is arranged with baskets of coloured pencils, pens and watercolours that flank a piece of ongoing work. In a glass-fronted case, neat boxes of Winsor & Newton inks stand ready for use. Ray appears to agree with William Morris that things should be both beautiful and useful. It is, she says, "natural to decorate things".

Being used to seeing Ray's work published in A4 format, the sight of a piece of A3 Waterford paper showing three kings bearing gifts is startling. In the midst of a royal head of cobweb-fine hair a nesting "moonbird" sings. There are many touches of gold and soft colour washes.

Ray does not waste time. Her day, which begins with a two-mile walk, starts early and finishes late. It needs to – not only does she work on several commissions simultaneously, but she also supports local community projects such as at the Shapla School,

where her encouragement to "paint me a poem" resulted in the collection *Dive Into Poems*, (London Borough of Tower Hamlets, 1996) accompanied by the pupils' Ray-inspired illustrations. There has also been a Noah's Ark workshop, involving "painting, gluing and sticking" with 40 children under seven and, more recently, she has produced designs for the exhibition rooms at Seven Stories, The Centre for the Children's Book, in Newcastle upon Tyne, along with other illustrators.

Given that much of her work requires solitude, she says it is "important to get out and talk to others doing the same thing". Her design for the exhibition, "Time", is influenced by two of her favourite children's stories: *Tom's Midnight Garden* and *The Children of Green Knowe*. She also mentions *Alice in Wonderland* as a great love: "I was unable to put it down."

With accolades and award nominations continuing to stack up, Ray's style will surely stand the test of time and be enjoyed by generations to come.



Caroline Stockwell is a writer and teaches English and drama. For books by Jane Ray, visit [www.janeray.com](http://www.janeray.com)