

# Influences of European Art on Walt Disney's Animated Features

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Jović, Marko

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**Marko Jović**

Influences of European Art on Walt Disney's Animated Features

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**INFLUENCES OF EUROPEAN ART ON WALT DISNEY'S ANIMATED  
FEATURES**

Mentor:

doc. dr. sc. Rajko Petković

Student:

Marko Jović

Zadar, prosinac 2015.



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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	4
1. Introduction.....	5
2. The One That Started It All: The Story of <i>Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs</i> .....	7
2.1 The Beginning of the Golden Age of American Animation.....	7
2.2. A Fairytale Comes to Life.....	8
2.3. The Fairest of Them All – Creating the Characters.....	12
2.4. Golden Age after <i>Snow White</i> .....	14
3. Once Upon a Dream: The Story Behind the Creation of <i>Sleeping Beauty</i> .....	15
3.1. Silver Era in Animation and the Beginnings of <i>Sleeping Beauty</i> .....	15
3.2. Challenges in Keeping up with New Trends in Animation and Eyvind Earle’s Legacy.....	16
3.3. The Duality Between Good and Evil Reimagined - Creating the Characters.....	19
3.4. <i>Sleeping Beauty</i> ’s legacy.....	21
4. Disney after Disney: Disney Renaissance and <i>Beauty and the Beast</i> .....	22
4.1. Going Back to the Roots.....	22
4.2. A New Take on the Tale as Old as Time.....	23
4.3. A Small Provincial Town Comes to Life.....	24
4.4. Human Again - Creating the Characters.....	28
4.5. Rebirth of the Old Glory.....	28
5. Conclusion.....	30
6. Works Cited.....	31
7. Prijevodi naslova i sažetka.....	33

### Abstract

This paper gives a thorough insight into the production of three significant Walt Disney's animated features, and examines the influences of European art on their visual design. All of these three films – *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Beauty and the Beast*, apart from being classic fairy tales, show their unbreakable links to the European artistic legacy. After the *Snow White*'s classic Golden age design, based on the nineteenth century graphic books, the visual part of the *Sleeping Beauty*, influenced by medieval artworks, offered something unique which allowed the further development of the Disney style in animation especially visible in the opulent Academy Award-winning *Beauty and the Beast*. Although the following chapters analyze some of the most important visual elements of these films, like backgrounds and character designs, they are also only the beginning of an even more thorough research of an insufficiently explored field in the history of animation.

*Keywords:* Walt Disney, Eyvind Earle, animation, film, European art

## 1. Introduction

There are certain phenomena that have changed the entire course of the history of art because of their importance. At the beginning of the fourteenth century, Giotto di Bondone, a renowned painter at the peak of his career, created one of the greatest masterpieces of the western culture – frescoes in the Capella Scrovegni or Arena Chapel in Padua. Art historians consider this Giotto's achievement to be one of the milestones the entire western art that emerged after this moment was built upon. Every development in art over the centuries of the western civilization had its climax in this impressive fresco program. The same could be applied to American animation. All the animated short films created over the first couple of decades of the twentieth century, featuring many beloved animated characters like Mickey Mouse, were leading to something more grandiose. We could also agree that animation, as well as everything else in our civilization, was going through the inevitable process of maturing. And the only thing it was missing was a visionary, a person imaginative enough to lead the entire branch forward. This man was without any doubt Walt Disney. From the modest beginnings, over creating Oscar-winning animated shorts, Disney achieved the international acclamation with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937. The reputation Walt earned with this film was immeasurable when compared to the references in the press after the appearance of his first heroine – *Alice in Cartoonland* (Smoodin 9-10). It took an enormous amount of courage and perfection to achieve something so complex in the period of economic instability, something that would change the entire course of American animation.

Over the three following chapters, this paper goes through the history of American animation in the twentieth century analyzing three animated feature films of the utmost importance in the entire Walt Disney Studios' legacy. Apart from the inevitable story about the production of the films, the highest stress is put on the visual component of those same

features. From the inevitable *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), over visually breathtaking *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), to the technically masterful *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), many things had naturally changed, but one thing remained constant – the influence of European art. European artistic legacy has shaped the style in animation the Walt Disney Studios have developed over more than half a century of successful film production. Some art pieces only indirectly influenced animators in creating their imaginary fairytale worlds and characters, while some achievements of European art and architecture were directly quoted and transferred onto the big silver screen. Generally, the background artists, who worked on the previously mentioned animated feature films, sought the inspiration in several different art forms. The best elements of easel paintings, engravings, manuscript illumination, textile art, stained glass, sculpture, and architecture, have been carefully examined, and transferred on both backgrounds and celluloid, in order to create something new out of something we've always had access to. Each generation of artists, in every period of our history, got inspired by the works of the great masters. But, the most important thing is that their ability to make something even better, both technically and artistically, is what made their work truly remarkable and original. These three Disney classics, despite there being a considerable time lapse between them, prove these facts.



## 2. The One That Started It All: *The Story of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*

### 2.1 The Beginning of the Golden Age of American Animation

The story about the birth of the iconic American animated feature film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is also one of the greatest 'American success' stories, and the road to the stardom of one of the greatest visionaries in Hollywood, Walt Disney. At the time when many film moguls believed that the production of an hour and a half long film was simply impossible, Disney proved them wrong and produced, along with his team of the greatest experts, the milestone of his studio's animation upon whose legacy every latter animated classic we admire today was built (*Disney's Snow White*).

In the early days of his animation studio, Disney accomplished great success in the production of animated shorts, but it was simply not enough. As Robin Allan says in his book "Walt Disney and Europe: European Influences on the Animated Films of Walt Disney" (36), Disney was simply forced, primarily out of financial reasons, to set off on the journey of making a feature film, regardless of the popularity of his shorts, including those featuring Mickey Mouse. But, as it was previously mentioned, at the time when the USA was still struggling with the severe scars of the Great Depression, such an investment was a serious financial gamble. Collapse of the film would bring the simultaneous collapse of the entire studio, but although many of his colleagues tried to talk him out of this 'absurd' risk, Disney persevered in his ideas. What encouraged him to believe that people would accept the feature was the enthusiasm for *Three Little Pigs* (Barrier 2). He had even managed to convince animators to join his team even before he told them about his ideas for the film. Still, it is not so shocking if we take into consideration that the period around the year 1935 was one of the hardest for animators in Hollywood, and Disney was the only producer hiring (*Disney's Snow White*). It is reasonable to think that they couldn't have known the outcome of this groundbreaking endeavor, but what they were sure about were Disney's abilities of

storytelling, and his belief in his own talent. But Disney also believed that the future in animation was in moving from shorts to animated features, and the key figure in that future was Walt's brother Roy, who held all the finances (ibid.). Walt's perfectionism, which required more and more money, must have driven Roy crazy. And as the budget over the four and a half years of production was constantly growing, they were forced to ask bankers for help. They were dreaded by the outcome, but the heads of the Bank of America were thrilled by Walt's ideas and his presentation of the project (ibid.). Their enthrallment proved to be true. Regardless the poor advertising, after the premiere held on December 21<sup>st</sup> 1937, critics declared *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* the most important film ever made (ibid.). And they were not wrong, because this film was a great *gesamtkunstwerk*,<sup>1</sup> combining the best of Europe's artistic legacy and fresh American tendencies, which will serve as the greatest inspiration for the future generations of animators.

## 2.2. A Fairytale Comes to Life

It is quite obvious from the previous paragraph that the production of this film was not easy from the financial point of view, but the artistic department faced many problems as well. As it was something that no one had ever done before, they couldn't just jump into it without a certain practice. Robin Allan (36) points out that it was the production of *Silly Symphonies* that prepared animators, and Disney himself, for the first animated feature. But the most important part, upon which everything else was built, was the story. The German fairy tale about a humble princess persecuted by her evil stepmother had such a huge impact on Disney when he first came across it in the collection of fairy tales by the Grimm brothers. His childhood recollections grew even stronger when he saw the live action footage of the story screened for his group of newsboys (*Disney's Snow White*). He later claimed to have such fond memories related to this fairy tale, but the German original had to be altered to a

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<sup>1</sup> Gesamtkunstwerk is a German expression for the total work of art, i.e. the synthesis of different art forms in a comprehensive ensemble.

great extent for it was too grotesque and gloomy for American audience. Leonard Maltin (53) states that Disney needed a cohesive script with one sequence flowing into the next, and comic or musical interludes. The story was maximally simplified and made more appealing to the general audiences by intertwining it with cheerful tunes. Basically, the entire film was based on the simple duality between good and evil, which can be analyzed on more than just one level.

The animators found the sources for the visual component of the film mostly in the European art of the nineteenth century, thanks to the illustrated versions of Grimm tales the Disney Studio Library owned (Allan 38). The great part of those illustrations belonged to the European representatives of the art of Romanticism, which came up during the great social changes in the nineteenth century Europe. The art of Romanticism served as an alternative to the dominant ideas of the Enlightenment movement, and sought for more sublime aspect of life in the escape from the reality, to the past and to faraway lands. This is the point where we can find connections with Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, mostly in the ideas of escaping from the cruel reality, and creating something new and fresh out of something we already own, i.e. our legacy.

One of the artists whose work influenced American animators was Ludwig Richter, a German artist best known for his landscapes and illustrations of fairy tales and legends, and the leading representative of the late romantic style (Ludwig Richter). One of the scenes from the film that resembles the most to Richter's illustration for *Beschaulichen und Erbaulichen* (contemplative and didactic) is the one when our heroine meets the Prince for the first time by the wishing well (see fig. 1). Many elements were taken from Richter's illustrations, most notably the romantic setting of the castle covered in tendrils and flowers, as well as the interaction between the two characters; a conventional young hero seducing with his charming voice, and a beautiful lady in rags unsuccessfully trying to hide her interest for her

beau. Furthermore, Robin Allan (30) mentions several other similarities including the Prince's romantic attire featuring jerkin, short sword, and a cap with a feather, doves serving as messengers between the Prince and Snow White, and one inevitable element – an old lady observing the scene from her nook, which probably inspired animators for the way the angry Evil Queen jealously observes her stepdaughter from the window of her chamber.



Fig. 1 Ludwig Richter's illustration for *Beschaulischen und Erbaulischen* (right) inspired the sequence in which Snow White and the Prince meet for the first time by the wishing well. From Allan, Robin. *Walt Disney and Europe: European Influences on the Animated Films of Walt Disney*. 1999. London. Print.

Even though the 1937 animated feature was visually ‘softened’ as much as possible, several scenes retained that gloomy feeling distinctive for the 19<sup>th</sup> century illustrations, mostly those made by Gustave Doré whose great imagination and talent is best shown in his wood engravings. Similarities can be found between his illustrations for Dante's *Inferno*, which correspond to the tradition of terror of the popular horror film genre, and the scenes of Snow White escaping the murky forest which somehow seems to represent her inner fears, and evil sorcery which threatens. But the horror of the thick and long branches trying to trap her in the shadow of her own fears disappears with the first rays of the Sun uncovering a

lovely bosquet filled with friendly forest animals. Here we can see how Disney combines duality between European art and American reality in the form of North American flora and fauna. Another Gustave Doré's illustration from Dante's *Inferno* served as a template for one of the scenes from the film – the one with the Evil Queen dressed up as Witch leaving the castle in a boat (see fig. 2). Some of the uptight gestures from Gustave Doré's illustration, and his expressive atmosphere were successfully transmitted onto the silver screen: a hunched old hag with her thin and scrawny hands grabbing a paddle and setting out into the mist, with only one aim so easily readable from her spiteful gaze – to kill the Fairest of Them All. Apart



Fig. 2. Visual concept of the Evil Queen dressed up as Witch leaving the castle in a boat (left) was developed on one of Gustave Doré's illustrations of Dante's *Inferno* (right). From Doré, Gustave. *Illustration to Dante's Divine Comedy*. c.1855. Various Collections. [www.wga.hu](http://www.wga.hu). 23 October 2015.

from the 19<sup>th</sup> century graphic prints, inspiration was found in those a century older ones as well. The etchings by the most important predecessor of the 19<sup>th</sup> century graphic prints Giovanni Battista Piranesi, with the motifs of fictitious and surreal underground prisons consisting of a number of stone vaults, staircases and mysterious machines altogether make a perfect setting for the Evil Queen's malevolent plans.

### 2.3. The Fairest of Them All – Creating the Characters

When we are talking about the visual sources for the characters, especially those of Snow White and the Evil Queen, we have to go even further back into the past of the European art heritage, and seek inspiration in the Gothic sculpture. The character that carries the entire story is of course *Snow White*, in whose embodiment animators merged the ideals of the Medieval European world, and American standards of beauty from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her character could easily be compared to the statue of the Virgin Mary which is the part of the Veit Stoss' Annunciation group from the Lorenzkirche in Nürnberg, Germany (see fig. 3). The ideals of a true heroine, purity, chastity, innocence, and willingness to sacrifice for the good of the others are present both in this wooden statue, and the animated character of Snow White. Furthermore, Virgin's facial physiognomy, oblong face with wide eyes, small nose, finely arched eyebrows, small sensual lips, small, stylized hair, and fair skin with blushed cheeks, quite resemble Snow White's. Even the color scheme is very similar with the stress put on the shades of red, navy, and gold. But, Snow White's look is still a very contemporary, stylized version of a medieval lady based on the 1930s fashion trends like bobby pin hairstyle. In the end Walt Disney's Snow White was just like the Virgin Mary, something between a child, like Shirley Temple or Judy Garland, and a mother figure, protecting her loved ones (Allan 60).

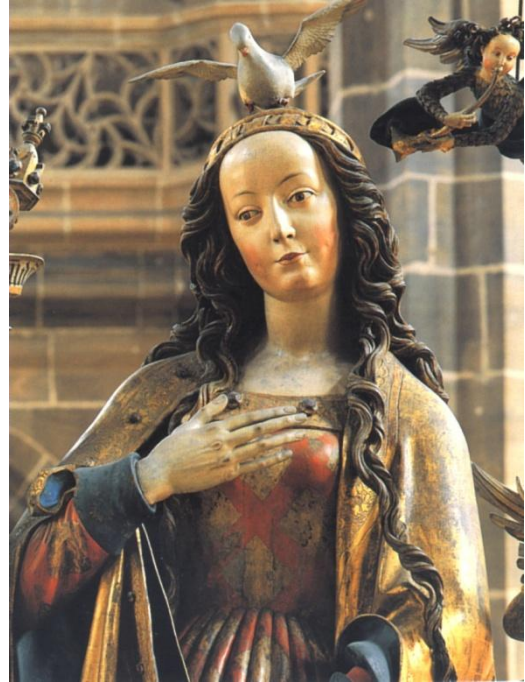


Fig. 3. Virgin Mary. From Stoss, Veit. *Annunciation*. 1517-1518. St Lorenzkirche. Nürnberg. Germany. Private collection.

The principle of duality between good and evil is achieved by contrasting Snow

White's fragile look to her stepmother's fierce look based on another Gothic sculpture. Animators found inspiration for this bold, but painfully beautiful female antagonist in the portrait of Lady Uta from the Naumburg Cathedral (see fig. 4). Uta is just one out of the 12 life-sized figures which the unknown sculptor, named the Naumburg Master, endowed with individual characteristics in the manner no earlier master had achieved ever before (Geese in



Fig. 4 Animators found inspiration for the Evil Queen (left) in the portrait of Lady Uta from the Naumburg Cathedral (right). From Naumburg master. *Twelve donor portraits*. 13<sup>th</sup> ct. Naumburg Cathedral. Germany. Private collection.

Toman 343). Their physical resemblance is strong on so many levels, including their typically gothic attires with long cloaks, and similar golden crowns. But the similarities between their facial gestures are even stronger, revealing cruel intentions and determination under the beautiful masks of their faces. These *femme fatales* are gorgeously magnificent and ruthlessly dangerous at the same time. The Queen also bears a strong physical resemblance to a beloved old Hollywood actress Katherine Hepburn (*Disney's Snow White*), whose characteristics as a strong, independent, and decisive woman will be used by animators more than fifty years later in creating the heroine of the enchanting Academy Award-winning film *Beauty and the Beast*.

#### **2.4. Golden Age after Snow White**

Walt Disney's film gave a unique and new formula in film-making, intertwining fantasy and drama with a cheerful musical score, which enabled the production of an equally vibrant classic two years later – *The Wizard of Oz* (Smoodin 81). After a major commercial success with *The Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937, the following decade saw the production of some of the most memorable Walt Disney films like *Pinocchio* and *Fantasia* in 1940, *Dumbo* in 1941, and *Bambi* in 1942. All of these films were visually breathtaking, but none of them managed to reach Snow White's level of artistic achievements. Neither will any animated feature film after them, until the release of *Sleeping Beauty* in 1959.



### 3. Once Upon a Dream: The Story Behind the Creation of *Sleeping Beauty*

#### 3.1. Silver Era in Animation and the Beginnings of *Sleeping Beauty*

After the Golden Age of Disney animation, which commenced with the groundbreaking film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937, and concluded with *Bambi* in 1942, the following two decades brought a completely new age of brilliant and influential films – the Silver Era in animation (Animated Film Reviews). Some of the most recognizable and acclaimed Walt Disney animated features like *Cinderella* (1950), *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), *Peter Pan* (1953), *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961), and Disney's ultimate film *The Jungle Book* (1967), were produced over the span of almost twenty years. But, the most brilliant gem out of all these remarkable animated features is undeniably *Sleeping Beauty*, first shown in 1959.

Both animators and animation historians agree that *Sleeping Beauty* is the proper successor to *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in terms of breaking the grounds of animation, storytelling, and the musical and visual style. Even though *Cinderella*, which marked the beginning of the Silver Age in 1950, was by all standards both commercial and financial success, the entire line up of films that followed was not, regardless of their critical acclamation. This was one of the main reasons why Disney decided to go back to the roots, i.e. to the classical fairytale based on the eternal battle between good and evil. The story of a young princess who awakens by true love's kiss after falling into a deep sleep caused by the evil fairy Maleficent's curse, had a number of incarnations over centuries. We could even say that each generation had its variation of this ancient love story, from Charles Perrault's 1697 *La Belle au bois dormant* (The Beauty of the Sleeping Forest) to the Walt Disney Studios' 2014 feature film *Maleficent* starring Angelina Jolie in the title role (Solomon *Once* 11). The original story was considerably changed in order make the main story, its characters, and visual identity stand out.

### 3.2. Challenges in Keeping up with New Trends in Animation and Eyvind Earle's Legacy

The production, as it usually goes with the animated features, spanned over almost an entire decade, starting in 1951. As Robin Allan states (232), the design innovations and filming in 70 millimeter the expenses came to staggering six million dollars, even though the creative strength grew up on the Snow White legacy. Although Disney wished to get back to his origins with this film, he also had to make a significant swift with its visuals in order to make it more appealing to the emerging younger generations of filmgoers. The problem, according to the animation director Michael Sporn,

was the ascendance of the UPA animation studios whose visual designs were built on a fresh, modernist approach to illustration style based on crisp colorful surfaces, and sharp clean lines (*Picture Perfect*). In spite of Walt Disney films being remarkably beautiful and polished, they were a bit outdated as well. Disney was previously renowned as a very capable and imaginative story teller, which probably led him to the idea of a moving tapestry. According to animation historian John Culhane, Disney became even surer about his ideas after his associate John Hench visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where he was



Fig. 5. Gothic narrative tapestry representing the hunt of a unicorn. From Unknown weaver. *The Unicorn in Captivity*. 1495-1505. Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York. [www.wga.hu](http://www.wga.hu). Web. 23 October 2015.

astonished by seven late Gothic narrative tapestries representing the hunt of a unicorn (see fig. 5), (*Picture Perfect*). Culhane continues saying that based on Hench's sketches acclaimed animator Eyvind Earle made the earliest drawings which served as the base for the further

production (*Picture Perfect*). Although the studio was familiar with all the brilliant late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries' illustrations of Perrault's *The Beauty of the Sleeping Forest* commissioned by Gustave Doré, Maxfield Parrish, William Breakspeare, and Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Eyvind Earle went for the style of international gothic (Solomon *Once* 14-18). The importance of Eyvind Earle in the creation of *Sleeping Beauty* lies in the fact that even Disney himself trusted in his talent and his abilities, and gave him as much freedom as he wanted in creating a new style which would depart from everything animators had done before. Earle himself claimed that his basis was the medieval art, especially tapestries, which he believed to be the perfect example of the direction the new look should follow. Charles Solomon states that out of all the paintings he came in touch with, like the works by Albrecht Dürer, Pieter Breughel the Elder, and Jan van Eyck, Earle was most impressed by one of the finest medieval manuscripts named *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* (The Book of Hours of Jean, Duke of Berry) created by brothers Herman, Jean, and Paul Limbourg between 1412 and 1416 (Solomon *Once* 30). The book contains twelve lavishly treated illustrations of months, which recall the *trecento* Italian style of painting,<sup>2</sup> mostly because of remarkable ability in rendering space (Kluckert in Toman 461). By comparing the Limbourg brothers' gothic illustrations, which show both lavish architecture and nature as the scenery of monthly works and different feasts and processions, and individual scenes from *Sleeping Beauty*, e.g. the scene showing the procession honoring the newly born princess Aurora, and especially those scenes set deep into the forest, one can notice how strong an impact medieval art had on Eyvind Earle (see fig. 6).

Firstly, he embraced bold medieval color scheme gathering different shades of green and yellow, shell pink, pale blue and lapis lazuli blue, and incorporated it within his sophisticated design. Secondly, rectangular and flat shapes, vertical axis, geometrical trees,

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<sup>2</sup> The Limbourgs may have been inspired by Ambroggio Lorenzetti's way of creating architectural complexes.

characteristic for previously mentioned illuminated manuscript, suited perfectly the new Disney style which had to compete with the UPA modernist style based on paintings by contemporary artists like Paul Cezanne, Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, Henri Matisse, etc. Eyvind Earle also adopted the principles in rendering space, which is the reason why one can actually tell what is the foreground and what is the background, unlike in other animated features where backgrounds seem to be a bit messed up and entangled (Solomon *Once* 31). Thirdly,



Fig. 6. Limbourg brothers' gothic illustrations (left) inspired the scene showing the procession honoring the newly born princess Aurora (right). From Limbourg brothers. *Septembre*. 1412-1416. Musée Condé. Chantilly. [www.wga.hu](http://www.wga.hu). Web. 23 October 2015.

some architectural elements were taken from the manuscript as well. This way the Duke of Berry's castle, with all its elegant towers, turrets, and pinnacles, got transferred onto the silver screen as the King Stephen's castle. The entire visual identity of *Sleeping Beauty* looks incredibly cohesive, almost like a proper medieval manuscript. And that feeling is enhanced at the very beginning by opening the early medieval book covered in jewels and set in front of a tapestry dating in circa 1500, and revealing the illuminated pages of this fairytale (see fig. 7). Finally, it is also crucial to point out that Eyvind Earle did not just simply copy what he saw on the museum walls, but he represented it through the twentieth century modernist point of view, and created something which shows the highest level of craftsmanship hardly

anyone could compete with today.

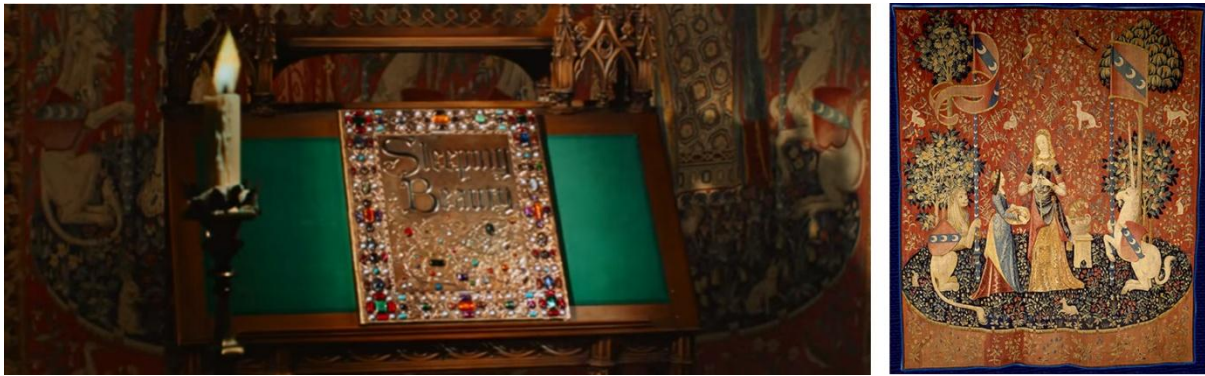


Fig. 7. One of the six medieval tapestries with the Lady and the Unicorn can be seen in the background of the opening sequence. From Unknown weaver. *The Lady and the Unicorn*. c.1500. Musée national du Moyen Âge. Paris. France. [www.tchevalier.com](http://www.tchevalier.com). Web. 23 October 2015.

### 3.3. The Duality Between Good and Evil Reimagined - Character Design

As of the creation of the characters, animators moved forward from the rounded shapes and figures that had become some kind of hallmark of Walt Disney Animation Studio. Although, as Robin Allan claims (235), princess Aurora retained most of Snow White's actions, and rather shy personality, and her physical appearance departed from the traditional Disney style used in all the previous animated features. In order to fit the characters into Eyvind Earle's modernist view of a medieval world, animators developed slimmer, elegant figures than usually, based mostly on very straight lines, which made Aurora appear almost completely angular (Solomon *Once* 55). Still, they managed to give the characters a new lease of life, and to make them appear more lively and energetic. Princess Aurora's hair had an impeccably important role in this, as it appeared to be the only round element of her physique (Solomon *Once* 55). Lavish strands of her hair, inspired by distinctive art nouveau curls, soften her sharp anatomy, and give her a sense of liveliness as she wanders through the stylized forest.

Regardless of the radical change in the visual design, *Sleeping Beauty* maintained the eternal principle of duality between good and evil, first introduced in *Snow White and Seven Dwarfs* in 1937. The initial number of Perrault's fairies was reduced from thirteen to only

four. Three good fairies Flora, Fauna and Merryweather give a sense of comic relief, while the fourth one, Maleficent, provides the element of horror. Her character of an independent, fierce, strong lady was built on the legacy of the Evil Queen from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, as they are both gorgeously dangerous, and impeccably nightmarish. Sometimes her character might seem even more important than all the others, mainly because she, in contrast to Perrault's story, starts all the action in storyline, from arriving to Princess Aurora's

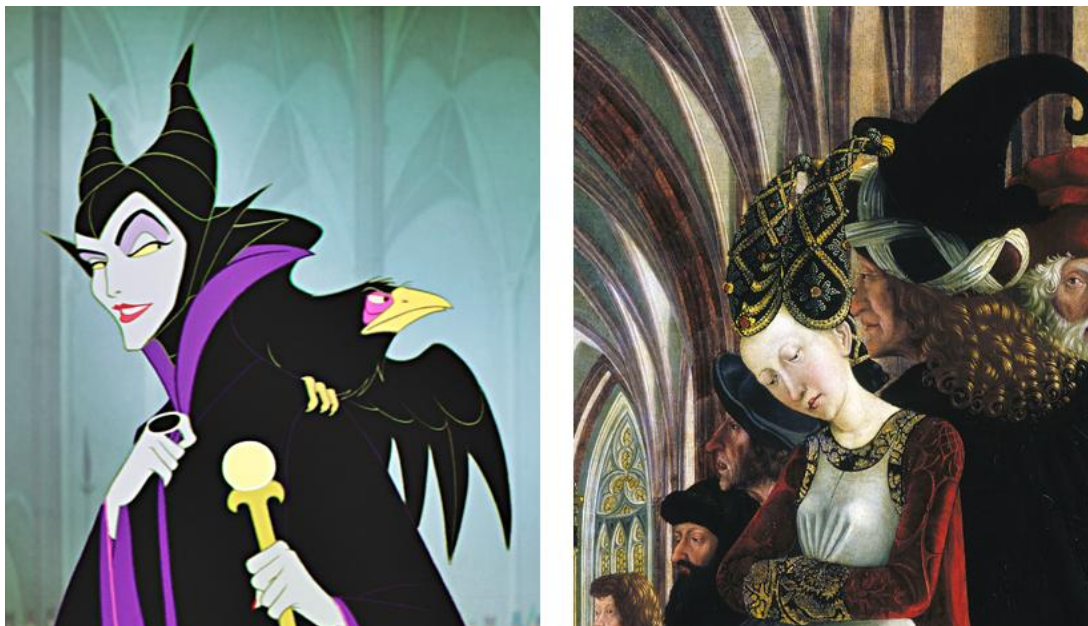


Fig. 8. A headdress similar to this one worn by the lady (right) on Michael Pacher's St Wolfgang Altarpiece (1479-1481) inspired Maleficent's visual appearance (left). From Pacher, Michael. *St Wolfgang Altarpiece: Christ and the Adulteress*. 1479-1481. Parish Church. Sankt Wolfgang, Austria. [www.wga.hu](http://www.wga.hu). Web. 23 October 2015.

christening, to the epic battle with Prince Phillip in the form of a dreadful dragon. At the same time she appears to be quite static, as if her entire appearance was modeled after the Renaissance decorum. In art terms decorum is a term which describes all the appropriate renderings and gestures of a character, including all the feelings, actions, speech appropriate for that same character based on its age and class position.<sup>3</sup> According to Charles Solomon (*Once* 64), Marc Davis, creator of both Aurora's and Maleficent's visual appearance, was

<sup>3</sup> Decorum cf. <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095706119#>.

inspired by the renaissance visualization of the court attires for women, especially by the headdresses in the shape of two symmetrical and elongated horns (see fig. 8). Solomon continues (64) by saying that Davis also created her overly dramatic robe to correspond the flame in the shade of yellow-green which derives from the Limbourg brothers' gothic illustrations, the same flame which bathes her elaborately designed elegant silhouette. Her appearance really is both frightening and breathtaking when she first appears in the great hall of the King Stephen's castle, which replicates the finest examples of the elongated architectural elements found in sacral Gothic edifices.

### **3.4. *Sleeping Beauty's* legacy**

Similar to *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937, *Sleeping Beauty* was an unimaginable gamble. But this time it didn't pay off. This visually polished adaptation of a familiar and beloved fairy tale, accompanied by the magnificent Peter Tchaikovsky music, was a failure, and Disney was fully aware of it. After its premiere on January 29<sup>th</sup> 1959, the film received mixed reviews, mostly because critics considered the entire concept with a damsel in distress, a horrifyingly beautiful villain, and a comic relief in the form of three good fairies, to be overly similar to the already existing *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Solomon *Once* 97). Despite its breathtaking visual approach, the film was a complete financial failure at the time. Fortunately, as the years passed, its amazing artistic value was recognized by new generations of both animators and fans, proving that Disney was right after all for getting into something that risky. Today *Sleeping Beauty* is considered to be the peak of design in animation that hardly anyone will achieve ever again.

## 4. Disney after Disney: Disney Renaissance and *Beauty and the Beast*

### 4.1. Going Back to the Roots

The ultimate Silver era animated feature film, *The Jungle Book*, was released on October 18<sup>th</sup> 1967, only ten months after Walt's death in December 1966. Not only was it the last animated feature film Disney produced, but also a milestone for a new direction in the Walt Disney Animation Studios, the so-called the Bronze or Dark Age in Disney animation (Animated Film Reviews). In his other monograph dedicated to the masterpiece of Disney Renaissance, "Tale as Old as Time: The Art of Making of *Beauty and the Beast*," Charles Solomon (17) states that the reason for a crisis in the studio was the fact that producers and animators had offered nothing fresh and groundbreaking as they used to couple of decades before. Over the seventies the Studio recruited twenty-five new animators to work on new projects together with the old crew, the "Nine Old Men," who would in turn pass on their knowledge and experience (ibid. 18). The merging of experience and fresh ideas resulted in *The Rescuers*, an animated feature film released in 1977.

Almost an entire decade later, after a number of considerable failures, the Walt Disney Studios began to wake up. In 1986 the Studio produced an animated feature which could be considered a sparkle that commenced the renowned Disney Renaissance. *The Great Mouse Detective* happened to be the first animated film to use computer animation, which will have an extensive use in animation in decades to follow. Everything up to this moment led to something that was inevitable - the return to the roots. The same thing that happened in the years that preceded *Sleeping Beauty*, happened once again. The adaptation of a classic fairytale proved to be a success once again. The success of the 1989 adaptation of Hans Christian's *The Little Mermaid* marked the beginning of a new era, which will bring the Walt Disney Studios its old glory.



## 4.2. A New Take on the Tale as Old as Time

Similar to the story of *Sleeping Beauty*, the basic theme underlying the story of *Beauty and the Beast* is actually old as time. This universal tale of redemption and love between opposites exists in a number of incarnations, in almost every familiar culture. The same theme served as an inspiration which many other tales were built upon, e.g. *The Phantom of the Opera*, or even *The Hunchback of the Notre Dame*. According to Charles Solomon, the Studio wished to move away from the original story in order to create something more appealing to the audiences, something unique which would have ‘Disney’ written all over it (Solomon *Tale* 15). After all, Disney had made the same gamble with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* almost half a century before, in the period when the industry was on a shaky ground because of the poor economy. Even the audience expected them to be innovative after the rebirth with *The Little Mermaid* in 1989.

The earliest works on the story began in the early 1980s, but it was not until 1988 that the Studio showed more interest in bringing it to the silver screen (ibid. 28). The initial version was visually austere, and did not suit both the story and colorful opulence the Studio nurtured for decades. It was obvious that something had to change in order for story to work. The crucial moment in production was the trip to the Loire Valley in late August 1989, when the group of animators managed to perceive truly what France was actually like (ibid. 51). But, the biggest change happened only a couple of months after their return, when the production was taken over by then inexperienced story artists Kirk Wise and Gary Trousdale (ibid. 55). The entire concept shifted to a completely new level, not only visually, but story-wise as well. Unlike Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, who were more passive damsels in distress, the new heroine had to be different, decisive, and more mature. Belle became a role model, an independent, headstrong young woman willing to take a risk in order to save her loved ones. This time the Prince was the one to save. His broken soul was in a state of decay,

seeking redemption. Their unusual relationship became the main pillar of the entire story, which was instantly more believable and heartwarming. The final breath of life to the story was given by Howard Ashman and Alan Menken who provided an extra charm by making it a musical, and an instant success.

### 4.3. A Small Provincial Town Comes to Life

One of the biggest problems producers faced was the very beginning of the film. Charles Solomon states that the segment narrating how the Beast fell under the curse created feuds between the most important people in the creative team – the composer Howard Ashman and directors Kirk Wise and Gary Trousdale (ibid. 57). Eventually, the directors' solution got accepted as the most suitable one. What Wise and Trousdale had imagined was



Fig. 9. The Beast's punishment was depicted at the beginning of the film in the form of a stained glass window (left). The same device was used during the Middle Ages to tell Biblical stories similar to this segment with the Prodigal son from the Cathedral of Chartres. From Unknown master. *The stained glass windows*. 1210. The Cathedral of Chartres. France. [www.vidimus.org](http://www.vidimus.org). Web. 23 October 2015.

the idea of narrating Beast's punishment for being immature and selfish using colorful stained glass windows (see fig. 9). The similar ideas were conceived during the Gothic period when the large stained glass windows covered a great amount of walls which were highly reduced because of the improvements in construction. Furthermore, just like a narrative sculpture, the stained glass windows had a crucial role in transferring Biblical stories to the illiterate

peasants who were at the same time astonished by the amount of light penetrating through the glass creating a sublime beauty. Wise and Trousdale managed to achieve the same, even though their final solution recalled to some degree Frank Lloyd Wright's designs distinctive for its geometric elements (Solomon *Tale* 58).

After the initial dark visual style was left for good, animators went for a softer and more romantic version suitable for the musical adaptation of one of the most beautiful love stories ever told. Although the research trip enabled the creative crew to experience more intimately the setting they wanted to use as a template for the story, they ended up using it only as a source of inspiration in creating their own imaginary world. Works by two French Rococo painters François Boucher and Jean-Honoré Fragonard initially influenced the animators, but they eventually went the other direction (ibid. 120). Romanticist landscape painting seemed to be the most suitable source for the world they had imagined (*Tale as Old as Time: Making*). Unlike the *Sleeping Beauty* stylized and geometrical landscapes based on medieval manuscripts, the Romanticist landscape painting provided almost soft and misty



Fig. 10. The Romanticist landscape similar to the one on John Constable's 1819 *The White Horse* (right) can be seen in some of the sequences of *Beauty and the Beast*. From Constable, John. *The White Horse*. 1819. Frick Collection. New York. USA. [www.artdigit.com](http://www.artdigit.com). Web. 23 October 2015.

perspective of nature, which is somehow very close to the landscapes found in Disney's Golden Age animated feature films like *Bambi* (1942), or even *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) (see fig. 10). John Constable's 1819 *The White Horse* gives a slight glimpse into the painter's romantic idea of an incorrupt vision of landscape in which his brushwork is

astonishingly descriptive despite the dimmed and misty atmosphere (Lukacher in Eisenman 116). Furthermore, paintings of the Romantic era, favored in the first half of the nineteenth century, used the motif of nature to express the sublime inner state of the characters, or even the painter himself. In this case, the landscape seen at the very beginning of the film, when Belle wanders through the streets of her small provincial town with her nose in the book, actually depicts the character of the town people, not Belle. Everything and everyone seems to be blended in this very soft, sepia-colored, almost dull world. Belle, of course, doesn't fit in this provincial world, but brings a sort of vibrancy with her unusual personality.

Other than nature, the Beast's castle represents another quintessential setting of the entire film in which the audience follows the development of the protagonists' relationship. As it was previously mentioned, architecture, as well as all the other aspects of the set design, only inspired animators to create their own imaginary world. Still, many architectural elements were taken from both French Renaissance and Baroque architecture. During their trip in France in 1989, animators visited the Renaissance château of Chambord the grandeur



Fig. 11. Staircases in the Beast's castle (left) and in the Winter Palace of Prince Eugene in Vienna (right) look almost the same. From Giuliani, Giovanni. *Staircase*. 1695. Stadpalais Prinz Eugen. Vienna. Austria. [www.photo-forum.net](http://www.photo-forum.net). Web. 23 October 2015.

of which served as the primary inspiration for the exteriors of the Beast's own castle (Solomon *Tale* 44). Eventually, the final look of the castle ended up being much more elongated than the original one. Many elements of the castle's spacious interior could be seen as the direct quotes of the actual Baroque architecture. The staircase in the Winter Palace of

Prince Eugene in Vienna, Austria, surprisingly resembles the staircase of the Beast's grand foyer (see fig.11). Four symmetrically arranged monumental sculptures of beasts holding the staircase construction correspond to the four Atlants holding the staircase construction in the Viennese Palace designed by the Austrian Baroque architect Fischer von Erlach. Not only does the animated staircase imitate the original Baroque construction, but the sculptures of the beasts follow the torsion of the muscular Atlants' bodies caused by the pressure of the lavish Baroque architecture. The pathos on their faces, frequent in Baroque sculpture, suits well the agony and punishment Beast carries on his shoulders, similar to the mythical Atlantes punished to eternally hold the sky on their shoulders.



Fig. 12. The Beast's ballroom (left) resembles the structure of the Grand Salon of the Château Vaux-le-Vicomte in France (right). From Le Vau, Louis. Vaux le Vicomte. 1658-1661. Maincy, France. [www.vaux-le-vicomte.com](http://www.vaux-le-vicomte.com). Web. 23 October 2015.

One of the most memorable scenes is the one with Belle and the Beast dancing in the ballroom featuring mesmerizing Ashman and Menken's song 'Tale as Old as Time.' While the oval ballroom with the marble colonnade loosely resembles Bernini's concept of the Saint Peter's Square in Vatican, it could be easily compared to the equally magical Grand Salon of the Château Vaux-le-Vicomte which, just like the Beast's own ballroom, opens to the equally elaborated gardens (see fig. 12). Charles Solomon states that the ballroom sequence was the key to the success of the entire film because everything was leading to this moment when two main characters finally fall in love (Solomon *Tale* 135). The sequence has a special place in

the history of animation because of the usage of the Computer Generated Imagery, previously seen in *The Great Mouse Detective*, which showed all the new possibilities in creating previously unimaginable animated backgrounds.

#### **4.4. Human Again - Creating the Characters**

Other than masterfully designed backgrounds, the importance of *Beauty and the Beast* in American animation is in its characters as well. According to Charles Solomon, the characters of Belle, the Beast and Gaston represent something new that American animation hadn't seen up to this moment (ibid. 95). The basic principle of duality present in both *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Sleeping Beauty*, got a completely different treatment in this film. The entire concept has shifted from the heroine and her nemesis to the Prince, recently only a supporting character, and the main villain, which in this case doesn't start the action, but enhances it. On one side there's a cursed Prince whose beastly physical appearance and savage manners hide his heart of gold, while on the other side there's a handsome hero whose attractiveness only masks his inner monster. The one who actually starts the action is Belle, a girl who is beautiful inside and out. Her character may have been built on the legacy of Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora, however it is also the proof that a female character doesn't have to wait to be saved, but she can be the one who saves instead. This female character is gorgeous, but unaware of her beauty at the same time. That allows her to see beyond the ugliness of the monster, and reveal the actual charm. Belle's character was based on Katherine Hepburn's mature and sophisticated personality (ibid. 104). Her characteristics as an independent, free-minded, intelligent person are being mocked by the people of the town she obviously doesn't belong to. However, those same qualities make her one of the rare Disney characters who serve as the perfect role models for their main audience – children and young adults.

#### **4.5. Rebirth of the Old Glory**

When the film was first shown in September 1991 at the New York Film Festival, it was still a work in progress, but due to the highest level of craftsmanship the film's stardom was launched. After the unexpected success at the Cannes Film Festival, the film premiered on November 15<sup>th</sup> 1991 receiving the best possible reviews. But that was just the beginning. A couple of months later, in January 1992, the film won three Golden Globe Awards for best original score, best original song, and best motion picture comedy or musical, and received six Academy Award nominations (Awards). The film eventually won two Oscars - for original score and original song, but the greatest success was the nomination for the best picture, the first ever for an animated film. This great achievement only proved that after the period of fifty-four years of animation, Disney finally reached that level of perfection and maturity Disney had always longed for, and managed to create something both artistically and technically brilliant, which will definitely be a new source of inspiration for the films in the years to come.

## 5. Conclusion

Sometimes artists out of lack of personal experience seek inspiration in work of those who left their significant signature in human history. That trait is characteristic in human nature, but doesn't necessarily mean that those people lack the ability to create their own self-expression. As it was obvious from the last couple of chapters, this indirect guidance from someone wiser only enables individuals to find their own voice. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was an achievement almost completely built on European legacy. But everything that its creators borrowed didn't just stagnate, but it blossomed into something more complex and visually valuable. Over the years Disney's first ever animated feature film became an ideal model of what animators should long for. At the very end of the 1950s, its legacy made it possible for animators to think outside the box, and produce something equally valuable, but visually quite daring. *Sleeping Beauty* set the new standards in animation, despite the initial failure. The fact that it is still considered to be one of the most artistically innovative animated features, only proves its importance in the history of American animation.

Although films that followed *Sleeping Beauty* never managed to reach the same level of complexity, what happened in the 1990s brought back Disney's old glory. *Beauty and the Beast* proved that some things never get old, and that we always get back to our roots no matter how hard we try to escape from them. Sometimes it is good for history to repeat, just to teach us to improve ourselves. The legacy of these three extraordinary animated features showed the new possibilities in film making, and enabled the production of more than fifty new animated feature films that all generations appreciate and always get back to. These films made it possible for us to see something we have always been familiar with in a completely new light, leaving enough space for the future generations of animators and film lovers to achieve the same sometimes in the future.



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## 7. Prijevodi naslova i sažetka:

Utjecaji europske umjetnosti na dugometražne animirane filmove Walta Disneyja

Ovaj rad daje temeljit uvid u produkciju triju važnih dugometražnih animiranih filmova Walta Disneyja, te istražuje utjecaje europske umjetnosti na njihov vizualni dizajn. Svaki od ova tri filma – *Snjeguljica i sedam patuljaka*, *Uspavana ljepotica*, i *Ljepotica i zvijer*, osim što su klasične bajke, pokazuje i svoje neraskidive veze s europskim umjetničkim nasljeđem. Nakon *Snjeguljičinog* klasičnog dizajna zlatnog doba, temeljenog na grafikama devetnaestog stoljeća, vizualni dio *Uspavane ljepotice*, nadahnut srednjovjekovnim umjetničkim djelima, ponudio je nešto jedinstveno što je omogućilo daljnji razvoj Disneyjevog stila u animaciji čija je raskoš uočljiva u *Ljepotici i zvijeri*, filmu ovjenčanom Oskarom. Premda rad analizira neke od najvažnijih vizualnih elemenata ovih filmova, poput dizajna pozadina i likova, on je ujedno samo početak još detaljnijeg istraživanja ovog nedovoljno iscrpljenog područja povijesti animacije.

*Ključne riječi:* Walt Disney, Eyvind Earle, animacija, film, europska umjetnost