

It's time to meet the Muppets -- on display in Arkansas



By Jill Zeman, Associated Press Writer | September 3, 2007

LITTLE ROCK -- "The Muppet Show" had humble beginnings: A few pages drawn in marker with cut-out photos that read: "Muppets Incorporated takes almost patriotic pride in presenting The Muppet Show, a concept for a half hour big budget show starring The Muppets."

The simple proposal is among the drawings, doodles, puppets and storyboards that show the creative process of Jim Henson, in an exhibit that opens its nationwide tour Friday at the Arkansas Arts Center and will travel through 2011.

The exhibit shows a primitive drawing of Big Bird, labeled as "Nutty-Bird." Another Big Bird sketch shows how the puppet is operated -- the puppeteer reaches his hand above his head to operate Big Bird's mouth, while seeing outside the puppet via a small screen in the costume.

Oscar the Grouch is sketched in a 1969 drawing, but the surly garbage-can dweller is purple, not green. The exhibit also showcases Muppets, typically made of fleece or fur fabric and with polyurethane foam, including a 1992 puppet with a singsong name that gets stuck in visitors' heads: Mahna Mahna.

A drawing on yellow legal-pad paper shows the origins of the Muppet Beaker -- along with sketches of the pal to Dr. Bunsen Honeydew, Henson includes the notes, "Flesh color," "pink nose" and "Mouth to scream."

"Jim Henson was a wonderful artist who worked in many, many media and kind of changed our world. And that's why we're excited about this show," said Nan Plummer, executive director of the Arkansas Arts Center.

"Jim Henson's Fantastic World" comes from the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service and The Jim Henson Legacy. It features 100 pieces, many of which have never before been displayed. The pieces are on loan from the Henson family, the Jim Henson Co., The Muppets Studio and Sesame Workshop, along with the Jim Henson Legacy and Smithsonian.

The exhibit will run through Nov. 25 in Little Rock, then goes to the Arizona Museum for Youth in Mesa, Ariz., where it will open Dec. 15.

The exhibit also has stops planned over the next three years at the Louisiana Art and Science Museum in Baton Rouge; the Smithsonian's International Gallery in Washington, D.C.; the Atlanta History Center; the Orange County Regional History Center in Orlando, Fla.; The Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Ky.; the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, Pa.; the Mississippi Museum of Art in Jackson; the National Heritage Museum in Lexington, Mass.; and the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago.

Josette Cole, registrar with the Smithsonian Institutional Traveling Exhibition Service, said the new exhibit is the most comprehensive Henson art show to date.

"A lot of these have never been seen before," she said, referring to doodles and sketches done on typewriter paper, notebooks and legal pads. "With the nature of the works on paper, they can't stay on the road so long, and that's sort of pushing it for these especially, because they're intended to be sketches and were not done for durability," Cole said.

The exhibit includes art and photos from Henson's childhood until his death in 1990. One photo, from 1946, shows a young Henson pretending to be a snake charmer with a garden hose in Leland, Miss.

The show also displays Henson's art from his high school and college days in Maryland, when he was drawing cartoons similar to those run in The New Yorker.

"This is an exhibition that's really about Jim Henson, and that creative process, which really started when he was in high school," Cole said.

Among the Muppets displayed in the exhibit are 1968 puppets King Goshposh and Featherstone, used in 1970's "Hey Cinderella!" and 1971's The Frog Prince; Wilkins and Wontkins, used for Wilkins Coffee commercials in 1979; piano-playing Rowlf from 1976; Kermit the Frog, sitting on a log; and Bert and Ernie, from the 1970s and 1980s.

Another pencil on paper drawing, from 1970's "The Great Santa Claus Switch," depicts the special's featured elves: Zippity, Pippity, Boppity, Bing, Bong and Fred.

Plummer said the Arts Center, in downtown Little Rock, lobbied hard to land the Henson exhibit.

"We'd made a strategic decision that we were going to look for a major show that was family friendly and it took us awhile to find it," she said. "But when this appeared, we knew this is it, this is it. So we really angled hard to get it."

The museum has a large collection of works on paper, so Henson's pencil sketches of Muppets and characters complement the center's art well, Plummer said.

"It's cartoons and it's puppets, but the creativity of it -- I just love that it's on lined paper. We all have a pencil and lined paper. It's really inspiring," she said.

In the bright orange and purple entrance to the exhibit, visitors are greeted with a poster featuring a quote from Fraggle Rock's Cantus that organizers say epitomize Henson: "There are no rules, and those are the rules."

On the Net:

Arkansas Arts Center: <http://www.arkarts.com>

The Jim Henson Legacy: <http://www.jimhensonlegacy.org>

Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service: <http://www.sites.si.edu> ■

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