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The Best 2023 Children's Books About Artists

BY HOWARD HALLE  January 31, 2023 10:00am[f](#) [t](#) [t](#) [p](#) [+](#)

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Every child starts out as an artist, bringing home drawings and ceramics that wind up occupying pride of place on the family's refrigerator door or mantelpiece. Of course, not every kid grows up to be an artist, let alone a famous one. Still, however big their interest in art, most children could probably learn something by hearing or reading about the lives of artists. More than just the specifics about a period or certain body of work, such narratives relay the virtues of creativity and sticking to one's dreams no matter the obstacles—life lessons, in other words, that are worth imparting to any child, regardless of age. Luckily, there are scores of artist biographies aimed at kids, from toddlers to high-schoolers. We've assembled a list of 12 scintillating titles about modern and contemporary artists, all of which combine writing and imagery to tell their stories.

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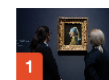
1. C. Ian White, *Grandpa and the Library: How Charles White Learned to Paint*

Known for a robust, realist style that spoke to his strengths as a draftsman, Charles White (1918–1979) was a key chronicler of African American life whose work covered a period from the 1930s to the 1970s. But as C. Ian White points out in this story about his grandfather's art education, the elder White started on his path toward art renown through an experience familiar to children of working parents: On her way to her job every day, White's mother would drop him off at the public library, where he would spend the day drawing the goings-on he observed or reading books about art while under the watchful eyes of the librarian. On Saturdays, his mother would take him to the Chicago Art Institute to encourage ambitions that eventually blossomed into a celebrated career. *Ages 4 to 8.*



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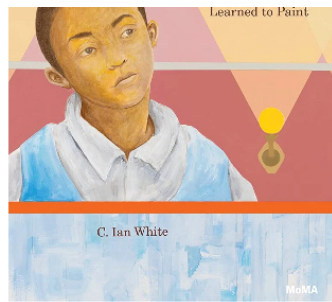
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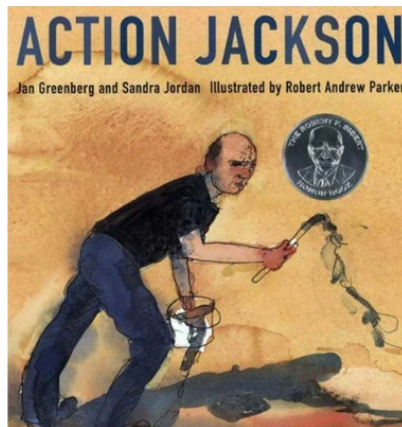
Buy: **Grandpa and the Library: How Charles White Learned to Paint**
\$19.95

Buy it

2. Jan Greenberg, *Action Jackson*

The controlled chaos of Jackson Pollock's drip painting may be especially relatable to kids, and through this handsomely illustrated picture book they'll experience the artist at the height of his powers. *Action Jackson* focuses on the period during 1950 when he painted his masterpiece, *Number 1* (also known as *Lavender Mist*), with words and images taking young readers through his process. Pollock was famous for working in a small barn, where he'd place his canvas on the floor, moving around its edges to apply paint by flinging it from a stick with a twist of the wrist. The book opens with Pollock setting up, then follows along as he paints. The narrative weaves in quotes from the artist and his peers along with descriptions of his early life, in a lyrical tone that's more than matched by impressionistic watercolor illustrations by Robert Andrew Parker that are often laid out in two-page spreads.

Ages 6 to 10.



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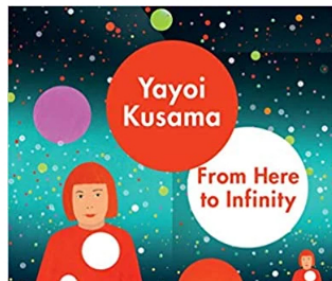
Buy: **Action Jackson \$8.99**

Buy it

3. Sarah Suzuki, *Yayoi Kusama: From Here to Infinity*

This biography of one of the most (if not *the* most) famous living artists (b. 1929) pairs short texts by author Sarah Suzuki with vivid illustrations by Ellen Weinstein in a crisp, brightly colored style well suited to Yayoi Kusama's extraordinary life and the graphic punch of her signature polka dots. The book begins with Kusama's childhood in Japan, where her family ran a seed farm and plant nursery for flowers and vegetables. This inspired her to draw pictures of pumpkins while still in elementary school—the first stirrings of an artistic ambition that would strain against the societal strictures placed on women in Japan. Her escape to New York in the late 1950s is neatly encapsulated by an image of the artist looking down on midtown from the Empire State Building, just one of many illustrations that succinctly capture Kusama's journey to worldwide acclaim.

Age 13 and up.



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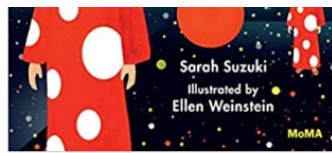
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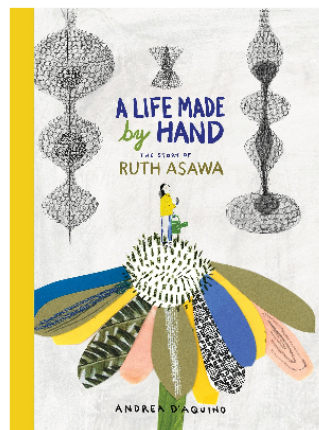
Buy: Yayoi Kusama: From Here to Infinity! \$16.49

Buy it

4. Andrea D'Aquino, *A Life Made by Hand: The Story of Ruth Asawa*

Ruth Asawa (1926–2013), a Japanese-American artist, activist, and educator working on the West Coast, was virtually unknown in the art world until her rediscovery during the 2010s. This was despite the fact that she studied under Josef Albers at the legendary Black Mountain College and enjoyed some early success during the 1950s, when she exhibited at venues such as the Whitney Biennial, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the São Paulo Biennial. Andrea D'Aquino pays homage to the work of Asawa (best known for her nature-inspired woven-metal basket sculptures) as well as her life, which included her family's incarceration at several internment camps during World War II and other brushes with anti-Asian prejudice. D'Aquino recalls Asawa's story by combining charcoal, colored pencil, and collage made with monoprinted paper into elegant illustrations that chime with the artist's ineffable aesthetic.

Ages 5 to 8.



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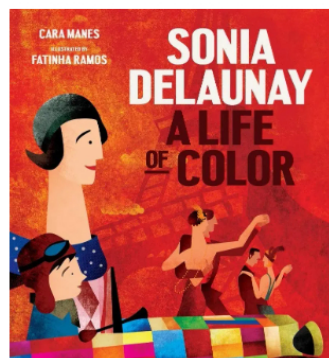
Buy: A Life Made by Hand: The Story of Ruth Asawa

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5. Cara Manes, *Sonia Delaunay: A Life of Color*

Sonia Delaunay (1885–1979) was among the first painters to explore pure abstraction through vivid color combinations organized within overlapping circles. These works were inspired by a patchwork quilt she made for her infant son, Charles, who plays an important role in this delightful tale taking mother and child on a fantastical journey in a flying automobile. Based on a 1925 Citroën convertible that Delaunay (who also worked in fashion) customized with her own design, the car propels Delaunay and Charles on a joyride through a landscape of the shapes, colors and patterns that informed the artist's work. Written by MoMA curator Cara Manes and illustrated by Fatinha Ramos, the book envisages the painter offering lessons on art and life to Charles as they zoom across Europe.

Ages 4 to 8.



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Ages 4 to 8.



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Uncle Andy's: A Faabbbulous Visit with Andy Warhol (Picture Puffin Books)
\$6.99

Buy it

7. Marina Muun, *Meet the Artist: Georgia O'Keeffe*

Part of the "Meet the Artist" series for kids published under the auspices of the Tate Gallery in London, this book offers an introduction to the life and work of Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986), one of the most important American artists of the 20th century. O'Keeffe, who spent a major part of her career in New Mexico, is celebrated for her scenes of the southwestern desert, her large-scale floral studies, and her abstractions derived from her observation of landscape and nature. A selection of her compositions, reproduced in full color, accompany details of her biography providing a sense of who O'Keeffe was and why her efforts were consequential to art history. The book also offers activities for young readers based on O'Keeffe's work, inviting them, for example, to create their own drawings inspired by motifs found in her paintings.

Ages 5 to 7.



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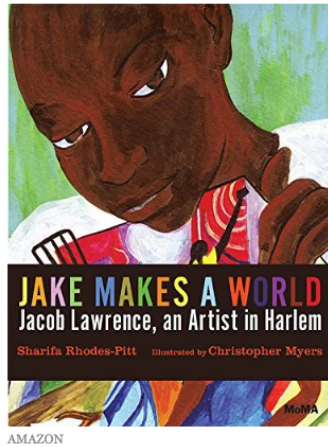
Buy: Meet Georgia O'Keeffe \$11.95

Buy it

8. Sharifa Rhodes-Pitt, *Jake Makes a World: Jacob Lawrence, a Young Artist in Harlem*

This picture-book biography of renowned painter Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000) was published the

same year—2015—that MoMA reunited the artist’s epic, 60-panel “Great Migration” cycle for an exhibition that spring. Created between 1940 and 1941, the series gives an account of the massive movement of African Americans out of the Jim Crow South to the relative freedom and economic opportunities of northern cities. Here, Sharifa Rhodes-Pitt tells the story of the artist’s own journey from Philadelphia in 1930 to rejoin his mother in Harlem, where she had gone looking for a job three years earlier. The precocious Lawrence was 13 at the time and already a blossoming young artist who would absorb the rambunctious sights and sounds of his new home and later transmute them into his equally vivid art. Rhodes-Pitt offers a lean narrative illustrated by Christopher Myers, whose images convey the spirit of Lawrence’s own.
Ages 4 to 8.



Buy: Jake Makes a World: Jacob Lawrence, A Young Artist in Harlem
\$18.39

Buy it

9. Fausto Gilberti, *Yves Klein Painted Everything Blue and Wasn't Sorry*

A fun, read-out-loud diversion for little kids, this book is part of series produced by the renowned art publishing house Phaidon. Each is titled for a particular artist and the direction they took to earn their acclaim—without apology, as the books make clear. This volume focuses on the midcentury French avant-gardist Yves Klein (1928–1962), who became famous for using a deep shade of aquamarine that he formulated and called International Klein Blue (IKB). The story begins with how Klein was inspired while looking at the sky, then proceeds to detail the many ways the hue figured into his work, not only as his signature pigment but also in performances such as one in 1957 in which he released 1,001 blue balloons into the heavens above Paris. Employing brief stretches of text and quirky, captivating illustrations, Fausto Gilberti tells the story in a way that any child can understand.
Ages 4 to 7.

YVES KLEIN
 Painted Everything Blue and Wasn't Sorry.



Buy: Yves Klein Painted Everything Blue and Wasn't Sorry. \$17.95

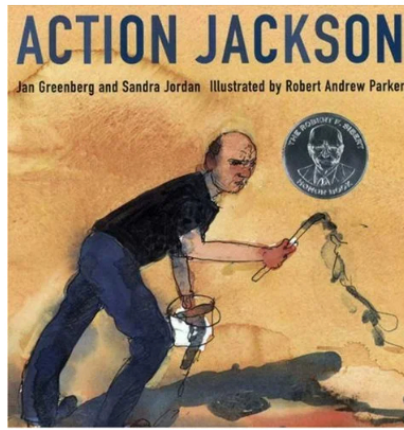
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Number 1 (also known as *Lavender Mist*), with words and images taking young readers through his process. Pollock was famous for working in a small barn, where he’d place his canvas on the floor, moving around its edges to apply paint by flinging it from a stick with a twist of the wrist. The book opens with Pollock setting up, then follows along as he paints. The narrative weaves in quotes from the artist and his peers along with descriptions of his early life, in a lyrical tone that’s more than



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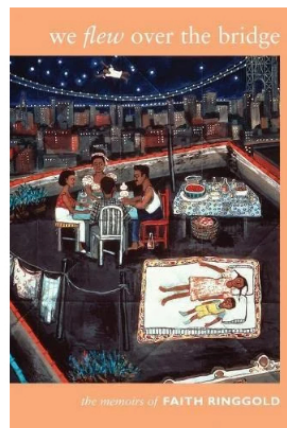
Buy: Ablaze with Color: A Story of Painter Alma Thomas \$16.99

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11. Faith Ringgold, *We Flew over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*

Faith Ringgold has spent 60 years as a painter, mixed-media sculptor, performance artist, writer, activist, educator, and—most pertinently for this autobiography—children’s book author. Here, Ringgold combines her talents as a writer and artist to offer a look at her life and the struggles she had to overcome to achieve her status as one of the most prominent African Americans in contemporary art. Ringgold was born in 1930 in Harlem, and her life has coincided with the struggle for civil rights, the Black Power movement, and the rise of feminism. But in this beautifully illustrated memoir (which also includes family photos and reproductions of her work), she focuses on the bonds of family and friendships that sustained her during a tumultuous period of American history when she was obliged to surmount the challenges of racism and the demands of raising children while making art.

Requires advanced reading skills, so best for older teens.



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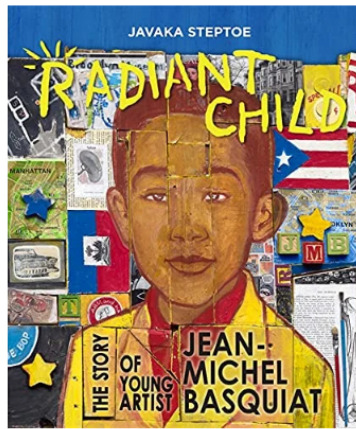
Buy: We Flew over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold \$28.95

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12. Javaka Steptoe, *Radiant Child: The Story of Young Artist Jean-Michel Basquiat*

Since his untimely death, Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988) has grown into a legend. Starting as a graffiti artist covering walls with the tag “SAMO©,” Basquiat stormed into the 1980s New York art world as a painter imbuing his work with bare-wire ferocity, borrowing from African art (as well as Picasso’s co-opting of same) to depict Black culture and its expropriation by white America. *Radiant Child* looks back at Basquiat’s beginnings as the son of a Puerto Rican mother and a Haitian father, harboring from a young age the dream of becoming a famous artist. His mother encouraged him with trips to museums and lessons that art can be found everywhere. She would also help him with his drawings at times. Basquiat’s formative years are evoked through

illustrations that combine graffiti and collage, much as the artist did, while also incorporating his signature images of skulls and leg bones.
Ages 5 to 9.



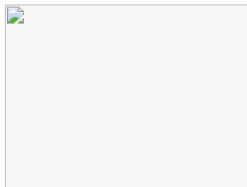
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Buy: Radiant Child: The Story of Young Artist Jean-Michel Basquiat
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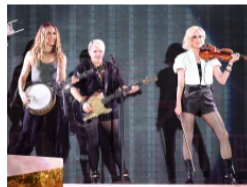
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