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Children's Books: 'Modern Art Explorer' Review

Picture books bring the museum home to inspire the eye and mind of young artists.

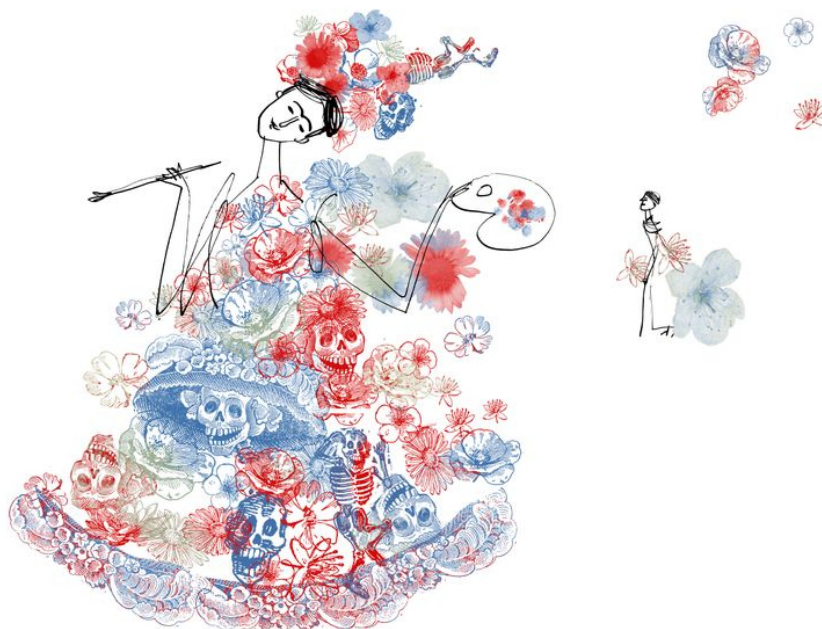


Illustration from 'Modern Art Explorer'

PHOTO: THAMES & HUDSON

By [Meghan Cox Gurdon](#)

Jan. 15, 2021 10:49 am ET



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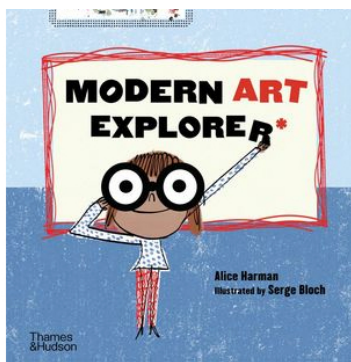
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Art is a consolation at the best of times. When life is rough, it's a balm for the soul. A stack of picture books offers children ages 4-8 a diverting glimpse into the creative vision of notable modern and contemporary visual artists and a stroll through the galleries of one of the world's most arresting collections.



Alice Harman takes young readers on a chatty and irreverent tour of the Centre Pompidou, in Paris, with "Modern Art Explorer" (Thames &



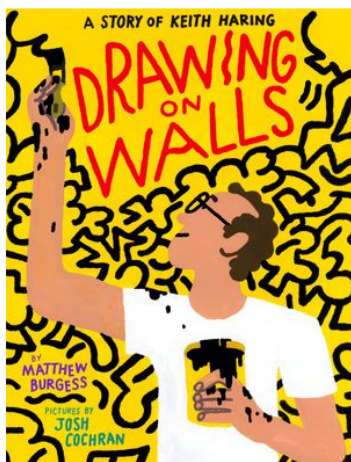


puckish Ms. Harman remarks that Kahlo “was the original selfie queen,” who used her images “to share her ideas, her Mexican culture and the great joys and pains of her life.”

Several illustrated biographies make it clear that the artist’s life doesn’t necessarily conduce to ease. In “Flying Paintings” (Candlewick, 40 pages, \$17.99), Amy Alznauer tells an impressionistic story of the brothers ShanZuo Zhou and DaHuang Zhou, starting with their upbringing in southern China and ending with the U.S.-based, globe-spanning double career they pursue today.



labor camp and, later, their mother into prison. They came and burned all the books, turning the words and paintings to ash.” In a phrase that recurs throughout this fascinating account, life and art (and argumentative brothers!) can be both “beautiful and terrible.”



a monastery in Pisa, Italy (by invitation of the friars). Haring kept working after receiving a diagnosis of AIDS, the disease that would take his life at 31. “I appreciate everything that has happened,” Mr. Burgess quotes him saying in that melancholy time, “especially the gift of life I was given that has created a silent bond between me and children.”

Hudson, 91 pages, \$19.95), a book featuring 30 paintings and sculptures. Serge Bloch has encircled each work with scratchy ink drawings and splotches of color, making stationary objects feel kinetic. Here is Robert Delaunay’s 1922 painting “Carousel of Pigs,” with its interlocking chromatic arcs: “You see the lights and the color and the movement, hear the fairground music and feel the dizzying, overwhelming effect of it all,” the author observes. Here too is Frida Kahlo’s 1938 painting “The Frame,” which depicts the artist surrounded by bright flowers and birds. The

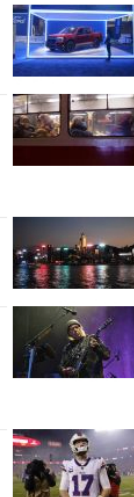
Born in Guangxi Province (in 1952 and 1957, respectively), the brothers grew up running around barefoot, playing and arguing and painting on the same canvasses. Their grandmother, who owned a bookstore, told them: “To become an artist, you must possess the highest spirit.” In the Zhou brothers’ own illustrations, we see the two of them as boys in loosely painted surroundings full of color. And then, abruptly, the colors faded to gray with the coming of the Cultural Revolution. As Ms. Alznauer explains: “The new People’s Republic of China did not appreciate the high spirits of people who ran their own stores and made their own art. They threw the brothers’ father into a

In “Drawing on Walls” (Enchanted Lion, 54 pages, \$18.95), Matthew Burgess traces the creative journey of artist Keith Haring from his childhood in small-town Pennsylvania to his early death in New York. “Keith drew all the time, everywhere,” we read of the artist as a young man. “ ‘But not on the walls!’ his mother would call, just as he was getting some big ideas.” As Josh Cochran shows in buoyant illustrations for this dynamic presentation, Haring (1958-90) was to do a great deal of mural work in his career, drawing and painting his graffiti-like loops, angles and exclamatory lines on surfaces all over the world: on Manhattan walls and subway platforms, on the T-shirts of young admirers (children seem to have adored him), on the Berlin Wall, even inside a church at

Like the Zhou brothers and Keith Haring, the experimental contemporary artist Yayoi

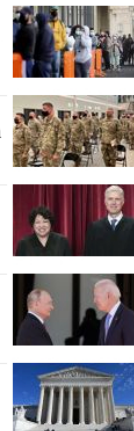
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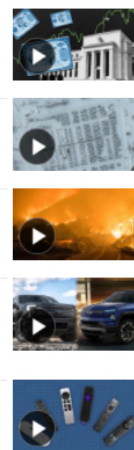
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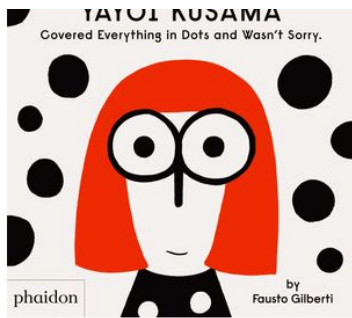


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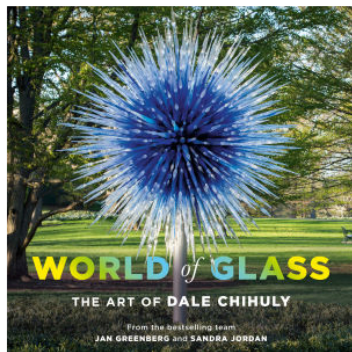
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Experimental contemporary artist Yayoi Kusama loved to draw from her earliest days. In “Yayoi Kusama Covered Everything in Dots and Wasn’t Sorry” (Phaidon, 40 pages, \$17.95), we discover that, in keeping with hoary tradition, the future designer of sensational “mirror rooms,” among other works, began her career as something of a starving artist. Born in Matsumoto, Japan, in 1929, she moved to the United States as an adult and, for a time, had to scavenge for food. In this entertaining biography, Fausto Gilberti shows her, looking

goggle-eyed and disconcerted, holding a bowl of fish heads to make into soup. “I lived on my own in an apartment where I painted day and night,” she tells us, through Mr. Gilberti: “I painted hundreds and hundreds of dots onto large canvases. . . . Each dot was part of thousands of others—they made me feel like I was a single dot that was part of our infinite universe.” This singular vision gained Ms. Kusama an early adherent in Georgia O’Keeffe, whose intervention helped launch the artist on the path she still treads today, at 91.



When Dale Chihuly was a little boy in the 1940s, he drew for hours with crayons, but there was otherwise no hint of his future making some of the world’s most extravagant and brilliantly colored sculptures. As Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordan explain in “World of Glass” (Abrams, 57 pages, \$22.99), the moment of creative ignition occurred when Mr. Chihuly was 23 and encountered glass-blowing. “To this day, I have never gotten over the excitement of molten glass,” he’s quoted saying. “I’m still amazed to see the first breath of air enter the hot gather of glass at the end of a blowpipe.”

Masses of photographs make these pages mesmerizing: We see glass being spun into colossal flowers and shaped into glowing orbs; we see trees of green glass tentacles, explosions of glass icicles, and a luminous wall of what appears to be multicolored ice that the artist created for an installation in Jerusalem. I’m telling you, there’s nothing like art to take your mind off politics.

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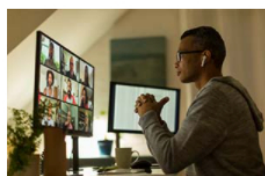
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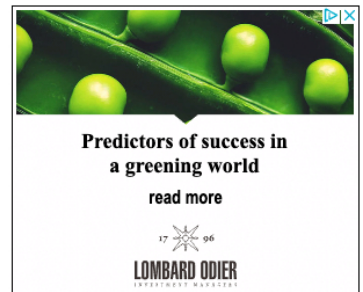
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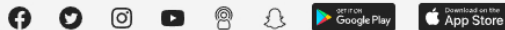
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