

Counting the Wings

Charley Harper perfected an inimitable style that celebrated nature's colorful purity. Now designer Todd Oldham, in an excerpt from his new book, talks about his friendship with Harper and about the artist's work.

By Julie Leibach



Late in 2001, I was rummaging through thrift stores in rural Pennsylvania when I came upon a stack of postcard-sized magazines called *Ford Times*. The magazine's diminutive size did nothing to distinguish itself amongst a sea of antiques, but the stunning modernist painting of a red-eyed vireo featured on the November 1959 issue stopped me in my tracks. Flipping through the issue I saw a series of eastern songbirds rendered in the same singular, simplistic manner. The illustrator's name: Charles Harper. Each bird painting was a marvel, brilliant in a way I had never seen before. . . .

Whether it was his series of American birds that appeared twice a year [in *Ford Times*] throughout most of the 1950s, or his drawings of the inner workings of a car assembly line, Charley's hand is unmistakably consistent. At the back of a March 1954 issue (the regional bird series appeared every March and November), I found a small article explaining the possibility of ordering silk-screen. I had barely read the last word before I was entering Charley's name into a Google search. To my complete delight I started finding the vintage silk-screens for sale. I ordered all I could find over the next year and every time they arrived, their beauty always stunned me. Charley's inspired, yet accurate, color sense is undeniable and, when combined with the precision he exacts on rendering only the most important details, one is always left with a sense of awe. As Charley says, 'I just count the wings, not the feathers.' ”—From *Charley Harper: An Illustrated Life*



So writes Todd Oldham, the world-famous New York-based designer and host of Bravo's home-decorating series *Top Design*, in the foreword of his new book on the artist Charley Harper (AMMO Books, \$200), a 420-page, nearly 12-pound encyclopedic monograph of Harper illustrations collected from magazines, books, promotions, paintings, murals, and posters. Oldham worked closely with Harper for five years to select the book's more than 700 images from the thousands the artist created throughout his prolific 66-year career.

Although Harper described his technique as "minimal realism," the term underplays what was involved in his work. The clean lines and flat planes of contained color that he employed were the product of months spent studying, composing, and mixing pigment for his pieces in a studio that—ironically—was "a complete and utter tornadoed mess," according to Oldham. At once highly stylized and exacting as well as stunningly colorful, the technique is impossible to really define or imitate, Oldham explains. "It's full of paradoxes. There's really nothing like it."

While Harper illustrated everything from molecules for *The Giant Golden Book of Biology*, a 1961 classic, to fruit slices for Libby's Pineapple Chunks advertisements, he also carved out a niche for himself among the great artists of avifauna, such as John James Audubon. "He's a rock star in the bird world," says Oldham. And it's no wonder. Harper looked to field guides to help him accurately portray the birds he chose to illustrate, never altering their colors or fabricating new species. "Charley had a whole library of bird books," says Oldham. "He was very earnest and honest in the representation."

Still, a depiction of a cardinal with a tear-shaped body or an owl with moon-sized eyes might seem more like a cartoon than a mirror image. But by distilling a bird to a collection of seemingly simple shapes and colors, Harper successfully captures its purest essence. "Absolutely not one extra thing is there," says Oldham. "It's a trait that runs through every single thing that Charley ever touched."

His faithful representations probably stemmed from Harper's devotion to nature and intention to inspire people to respect it. Indeed, that "conservation ethos," as Oldham calls it, prompted the 50-plus ecological posters he did for parks, nature centers, wilderness reserves, sanctuaries, and zoos—often for free. In fact, the cover of Audubon's 100th Christmas Bird Count publication sported a Harper rendition of a northern cardinal in a stand of evergreen trees. (He didn't charge a penny.)

Harper continued working until he passed away last June at the age of 84. Three of his final projects included posters for the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the Cape May Bird Observatory and a painting featuring a polar bear, which speaks to the problem of global warming. "I saw [Charley's] hands in action, and two years ago his hands were like kids' hands," says Oldham. Perhaps it's that youthful exuberance that makes Harper's work so timeless.



Mystery of the Missing Migrants, 1990

Charley Harper features 45 different birds in his painting "Mystery of the Missing Migrants."