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Tasha Tudor's Creative Imperative

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Abstract

Tasha Tudor was a prolific illustrator and author of children's books. At the same time she realized her dream of a self-sufficient lifestyle by owning a farm in Vermont. This paper examines her multifaceted creativity in relation to her endeavors to establish an independent alternative lifestyle.

Tasha Tudor (1915-2008) was a multi-talented artist who knew how to embrace life. She is known as an illustrator, a writer of children's books, and a gardener. Her nonconformist lifestyle has drawn considerable public and scholarly attention. Throughout her life she endeavored to live the life she wanted, which was to get away from the twentieth century and be as close to the 1830s as possible. For her, art was never the end goal but a financial vehicle to maintain her unique lifestyle. Tudor writes about her profession in *The Private World of Tasha Tudor*:

Everyone who likes my illustrations says, "Oh, you must be so enthralled with your creativity." That's nonsense. I'm a commercial artist, and I've done my books because I needed to earn my living, to keep the wolf away from the door, and to buy more bulbs!
(17)

This paper focuses on how Tudor cultivated her creative work while carrying out plans for her unique way of life.

Tudor's mother, Rosamond, influenced her when she was deciding upon a career. Her mother was a professional portrait painter. Tudor learned her artistic skills from her. In *The Art of Tasha Tudor* she writes about the moment she was inspired to follow in her mother's footsteps to become a professional artist. This was when her mother painted faces on her and her brother's bare tummies: "When we expanded or deflated them, the expression on the face changed. It was highly entertaining. Then and there, I decided that I would become an artist. As I usually get what I want, I did become an artist. I highly recommend it as a career" (19).

Tudor knew exactly what kind of artist she wished to be. Tudor's daughter, Bethany Tudor, writes in *Drawn From New England: Tasha Tudor, A Portrait in Words and Pictures*, that "unlike her mother, she did not want to be a portrait painter, but an illustrator only" (12). In her reminiscence of deciding her career, she writes in *The Private World of Tasha Tudor*, "What really got me thinking about illustrating children's books was I discovered Hugh

Thompson's illustrations for *The Vicar of Wakefield* in my mother's library and I looked at it and said, 'That's what I'm going to do' (17).

Tudor learned illustration and drawing from her mother, the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts and other artists. But she would discover a new style of learning and living because of her parents' divorce when she was nine. Since her mother's career was involved with Greenwich Village in New York City, Tudor was sent to live with family friends in Redding, Connecticut. She called them "Aunt Gwen and Uncle Michael." Their daughter's name was Rose. Tudor expressed her encounter with her new family in *The Private World*, " Suddenly, here I was, this proper little Bostonian girl raised by a Scottish nanny, thrown into this completely unorthodox household.... In Redding we lived like bohemians on shredded wheat and tomatoes and rice,..." (9). Bethany Tudor describes how her mother enjoyed her life free from judgment in *Drawn from New England*:

My mother found her new life exhilarating after her rather strict and formal life of little girls' tea parties, in starched dresses and Boston apartments, well supervised by grown-ups. Here in Connecticut she could run wild in a state of utter relaxation from discipline. Nothing was ever on schedule at Aunt Gwen's house, except on weekends when Rose's father came home from his job in the city. (16)

The experience of living with this nontraditional family opened her to the possibility of leading a life as she wished without the rigidity of the conventional society that she knew before.

Through Aunt Gwen's readings out loud of her plays and other writers' literary works to family members at night, Tudor acquired her love for acting out roles from literature. Bethany Tudor writes in *Drawn from New England*:

It was here that my mother and the girls enjoyed one of their favorite pastimes, known as "being people." Together they acted out characters from the wonderful romantic books read aloud at night by Aunt Gwen, whom my mother adored. Such books as *Carmen*, *The Cloister and the Hearth*, and the works of Dumas and Shakespeare were a few of the inspirations. (16)

Tudor comments on her transformative experiences of living with Aunt Gwen's family, in *The Private World of Tasha Tudor*: "It turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to me. It changed my life" (9).

In addition to the relaxed and informal environment, there is one more thing that helped Tudor develop her imagination: her love of books. In reading literature she developed the talent of visualizing what was going on in the stories. She talks about her interaction with reading *Moby-Dick* in *The Private World of Tasha Tudor*.

The Pictures it creates in your mind you never forget. You can even smell the food of the inn in the opening chapter. When I read a story, I see it like a movie, moving and all in color. Books are very real to me. (10)

Aunt Gwen played an important role in Tudor's education and budding creativity. Bethany Tudor writes in *Drawn from New England*, "The only worthwhile education she received was obtained through the hours and hours of reading done at Aunt Gwen's and the brief period of Uncle Henry's training" (18).

Furthermore, Tudor helped create an imaginary world using dolls of her own making. She gave her dolls names like Emma, Captain Thaddeus, Sethany Ann and Nicey Melinda, and made their own world as if they were real people. She also enjoyed Christmas with them. She talks about how her creative mind operated when she played with them in *The Private World of Tasha Tudor*.

I remember the amazing discovery, at age seven or eight, when suddenly I realized that I didn't have to talk out loud with my dolls. I could think everything in my head. That was a big revelation to me. I could play anything I wanted secretly, and I didn't have to say it. Because I was the youngest, I was very much an alone child. Really, you are always alone with your own mind. (49)

Tudor's way of celebrating Christmas with her dolls influenced her own lifestyle and her creativity. She created a means of communication between the dolls and her children through "Sparrow Post." In *The Doll's Christmas* (1950) she shared her family's Christmas celebration with the public. In *The Art of Tasha Tudor*, Harry Davis writes, "*The Dolls Christmas* helped Tasha to realize she could live the life she chose and created, and use it as inspiration for her illustrations. It was at this point that her life and art would start to intermingle, with reality and fantasy becoming a curious blend" (40).

Considering her experiences as a child, it is not surprising that Tudor engaged in creative work later on and became a prolific writer and illustrator of children's books. She was gifted as an illustrator, but behind her success she did not spare efforts in observing what she wanted to draw. Many of her models are her own children, her pets, animals, flowers and nature. Tudor illustrated corgis, cats, rabbits and goats minutely, accurately and expressively. In *Corgiville Fair* there is an iconic Tudor illustration of Josephine the goat suffering from being stuffed with mince pies and cigars by Edgar Tomcat before the race (27). In *The Art of Tasha Tudor*, Harry Davis describes how she endeavored to perfect her observations using real animals as her models.

When live models aren't available, Tasha uses carefully preserved dead animals, kept in a basement freezer. Her "mouse morgue" frequently contains as many as a dozen occupants. She sometimes prefers these models to live ones because, when partially thawed, she can pose them in various positions. In addition to mice on ice, she has had a variety of frozen birds, including an owl that posed for many years. All of her animals, alive or dead, appear over and over in her work, and she has many sketchbooks devoted entirely to one species or breed. (59-60)

At the beginning of her career Tudor wished to be an illustrator, but quite accidentally and suddenly her career as an author for children's books started when she simply wished to create a gift of her own making for her husband's five-year old niece, Sylvie Ann. Tudor used her imagination to write a story about a fictional Sylvie Ann, the same name as her niece's, having exciting experience of getting a huge pumpkin to make a jack-o'-lantern. She entitled it, *Pumpkin Moonshine*. On top of writing and illustrating a fun story about a character whose name is the same name as her husband's niece, she also paid attention to the size of the book and its covers. This is a small sized book so that, as Tudor says in *The Art of Tasha Tudor*, "how perfect it would feel in the hands of a child" (22). She used blue polka-dotted calico as covers. William John Hare writes about the size and the purpose of the book in *Tasha Tudor The Direction of Her Dreams*, "These books [five calico covered books] are only five by four inches and were designed for children to carry in their small pockets" (4).

Tudor needed to be recognized as an illustrator and writer. When she first wrote *Pumpkin Moonshine*, she was determined to find a publisher for it. After many rejections Oxford University Press agreed to publish her. Oxford University Press went on to publish Tudor's five calico books, *Pumpkin Moonshine* (1938), *Alexander the Gander* (1939), *The County Fair* (1940), *Dorcas Porkus* (1942), and *Linsey Woolsey* (1946). Tudor came to be recognized as a writer and illustrator of children's literature.

While working on her illustrations and children's stories, she was awarded the Caldecott Honor twice, the first time for *Mother Goose* (1944) and the second time for *I Is One* (1956). Oxford University Press published both. She was also awarded the Regina Medal for her contribution to children's literature and an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from the University of Vermont.

All through her life she was persistent in pursuing how she wanted her lifestyle to be. Professionally she achieved artistic success, but at the same time she was working hard to realize her nontraditional lifestyle. Her ultimate goal was to live in Vermont, leading a self-sufficient life while enjoying her profession, bringing up her four children, making marionettes, holding theatricals, cooking, farming and gardening. She was adamant in creating her lifestyle as she wished. Curiously her love of farming started when she was visiting her mother in New York City. She was given a lost hen from a truck and named her Nettie. She traveled with her from Redding to New York back and forth. Later she got a cow, Delilah. Her affection and attachment to animals led her to own a farm.

Tudor designed her own way of life even though that meant she had to carry water from its source and live without electricity. She had to take care of house chores and at the same time she had to make a living. She writes about her routine in *The Private World of Tasha Tudor*, "I was tired most of my younger life, with no electricity until my youngest child was five, hauling water with a shoulder yoke, and heating irons on the woodstove. But I didn't know

anything different, so it didn't seem like a hardship to me" (88).

Tudor loved the old ways, especially of the 1830s. She explains her infatuation of that period in *The Private World of Tasha Tudor*.

I'm drawn to the old ways, convinced that I lived before, in the 1830s. Everything comes so easily to me from that period, of that time: threading a loom, growing flax, spinning, and milking a cow. Einstein said that time is like a river, it flows in bends. If we could only step back around the turns, we could travel in either direction. I'm sure it's possible. When I die, I'm going right back to 1830s. (13)

She demonstrated how she wanted to live a life that was self-sufficient and recreating the 1830s. Harry Davis describes her 1830s lifestyle in *The Art of Tasha Tudor*:

Since childhood, Tasha has worked long and hard to create her version of what life had been like in the 1830s. It is an authentic and personal creation or, in her mind, re-creation of what she imagines that presumably more gentle time to have been like, authentic down to the original creation she herself had to become in order to inhabit it. Although she has been strong enough to overcome all obstacles and has, in the process, become enviably successful, and although she is imaginative enough to create that other world she so admires, she hasn't been able to share it without giving it up. (143)

In spite of her daily workload, Tudor was rewarded in her career as an artist and a person who loved to lead a life of over a century before. She drew pictures of her children in old style clothing. They are in her published illustrations. Bethany Tudor writes in *Drawn from New England*.

My mother often said she wanted to live a life similar to that of New Englanders in the past century. So that is what our family did, in a way, for many a year. It was not easy, but the rewards were most satisfying. One could say my mother's whole art career has been inspired by her lifestyle, plus the farm pets and animals. It all came about gradually, over a long period of years. (49)

Her married life and her family influenced her to become even more independent. She married Tom McCready who made efforts in adjusting to farm life. Tudor does not say much about her husband's attitude regarding earning money; it was obvious that she had to come up with some kind of means to support her husband and her children. Harry Davis writes in *The Art of Tasha Tudor*, "...Tasha was dismayed when she finally realized that McCready fully expected her to support them. Although Tasha tried valiantly, her income never seemed sufficient. The most-repeated statement Tasha remembers from that period was McCready's urging, 'Mommy, you've got to find a way to earn us more money'" (48).

Tudor had to work hard out of necessity, and it brought about her prolific productivity of her artwork and success in the end. She was the breadwinner of her family and she needed to find every possible way to make a living. Therefore financing her family was a great factor for

her productivity. Harry Davis writes in *The Art of Tasha Tudor* as follows:

Money is a significant motivating force in Tasha's life. She will readily admit that, "had it not been for the wolf at the door, I would never have had a career. I would have just sat around making paper dolls." Raising and education four children had been extremely expensive, and for many years Tasha had no choice but to take every project that came her way. Her originals were sold for whatever she could get as soon as they came back from the publishers. The years of constantly scraping for every dollar have left their mark on her. Even though she is now far past need, she well remembers how difficult it was for her and can work as hard as if the need were still there. (99)

On the other hand she had potential and strength to pursuit quality with her artistic skills. She desired to polish her creative works and was critical of them. She did not want to compromise artistic quality. She had a tendency of discarding works that she did not deem satisfactory. Harry Davis writes about what Tudor did with her unwanted pieces in *The Art of Tasha Tudor*:

Tasha has a long history of burning paintings she doesn't like. Even when she desperately needed the money they would bring, she was somewhat ruthless in destroying them. She never considered how marvelous they were to everyone else, only how they compared in her eyes with the artist she wish to be. Her habit was to hide them away until the pressure built up and then release herself from self-criticism by building a fire in the fireplace and committing them to the flames. (90-91)

Tudor was critical of her work as an artist even though she considered herself a commercial illustrator. Harry Davis describes the general ideas about artists and illustrators in *The Art of Tasha Tudor* as "In the period in which she [Tasha] grew up, the distinction constituted a real divide; artists were taken seriously, illustrators were for hire" (89). In fact, as Harry Davis notes in *The Art of Tasha Tudor* (89-91), among a large number of paintings, she was proud of only several, *Laura in the Snow* (1978), *Madonna in Blue* (1966), *Winter at Corgi Cottage* (1996), *Old-fashioned Roses*, Caleb Corgi (1997). She also got rid of the illustration from page 54 of *Tasha Tudor's Cookbook*. Harry Davis writes about Tudor's reaction to the illustration in *The Art of Tasha Tudor*, "It was never meant to be a turkey. Now it's nothing." ... "Besides, a turkey should be placed in a fireplace" (95).

As Tudor gained recognition and became successful in making a profit, "she would deplore the 'commercialization' by which it was made possible," (133) writes Harry Davis in *The Art of Tasha Tudor*. She endeavored to refine her artistic skills.

Not only did Tudor use her creativity in her profession, she also used her creativity in cooking, gardening, doing other house chores, celebrating Christmas, birthday parties, Halloween, Thanksgiving, Easter, Fourth of July, Valentine's Day, making dolls and marionettes. Especially she asserted her way of life pivoting around what Fra Giovanni said

and she quoted in *Take Joy!*: “The gloom of the world is but a shadow; behind it, yet, within our reach, is joy. Take joy” (9). She goes on to make sure that her life is based on taking joy as she says in *The Private World*, “Joy is there for the taking. Some people are born pessimists and some are born optimists. I’m definitely an optimist” (60).

Christmas was an important celebration for Tudor and her family. She planned her life from one Christmas to another enjoying preparation for it by making Advent calendars, Christmas tree ornaments, gingerbread cookies, beeswax candles, Advent wreaths, the crèche, Dundee cakes, Christmas dinner and gifts. Harry Davis says what he learned from Tudor about the essence of Christmas celebration in *Forever Christmas Tasha Tudor*:

Each of Tasha’s Christmas traditions is perfectly staged and timed, allowing for both anticipation and unhurried enjoyment of the moment. As Tasha explains, “Sometimes anticipating something is equal to its actually happening.” That is her first, most important lesson for a pressured, fast world where overscheduling and getting things done are considered virtues. Tasha has taught me to enjoy the thoughts of good times to come and to truly experience them as they happen, making each one last as long as possible. (4)

Tudor expressed Christmas not only for people but also for her dolls and animals. The unique part of her Christmas celebration was that she prepared Christmas for her dolls too. Harry Davis writes her recollection of the dolls’ Christmas in *Forever Christmas*:

When my children were small, I had to decorate the Christmas tree myself. I decided to have the dolls celebrate their own Christmas on Christmas Eve, complete with presents from them to the children. We even made a tiny tree for the dollhouse. While the children were helping the dolls celebrate, I decorated the tree. It kept the children busy and became a big event. Much anticipated. Their presents from the dolls along with their stockings, which they opened on Christmas morning, would keep them occupied most of Christmas Day. (70)

Tudor’s love of animals and nature also contributed to her creativity and influenced not only children but also adults with her compassion and humanity for animals. She published *The Christmas Cat* written by her daughter Efner Tudor Holmes and illustrated by Tudor. The story conveys a message that everyone needs warmth on a Christmas Eve including a stray cat.

Tudor lived a life that was fulfilling, humane, and creative. She strove for her dreams and made them come true. After all she was the person who practiced what Henry David Thoreau says in *Walden*, “I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary” (85). Tudor knew who she was, and what she wanted to be; she did not suffer from pretention, and she strove to obtain her goals with patience and perseverance.

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