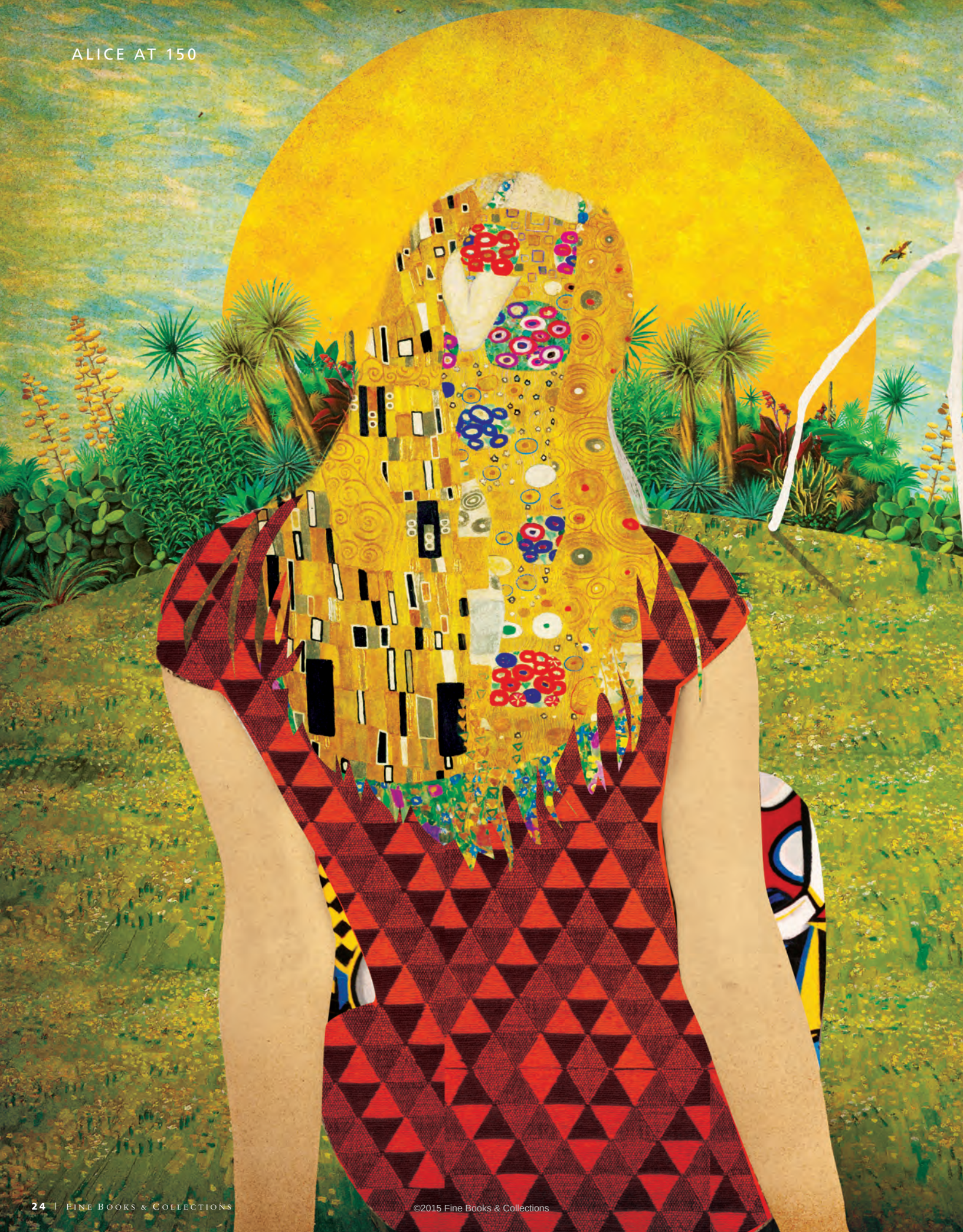


As part of a crowd-funded venture called 150Alice: The World's Most Collaborative Art Book, which brought together 150 contemporary artists from forty-two countries to celebrate *Alice*, Brazilian artist João Faissal took a surreal approach with this vivid garden scene.

CREDIT: JOÃO FAISSAL

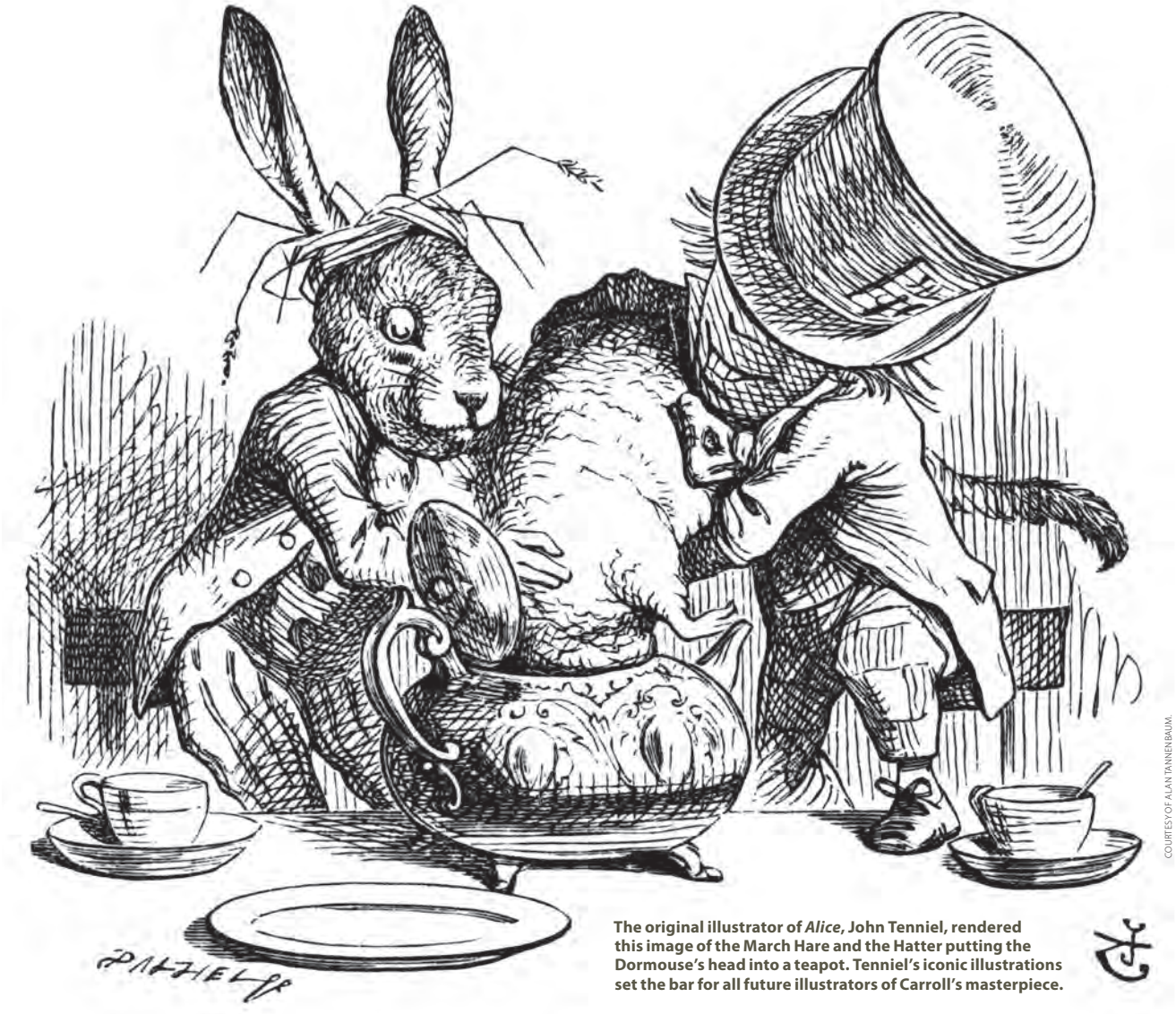
the Wonder of Alice

LEWIS CARROLL'S MASTERPIECE HAS CHALLENGED TRANSLATORS, ARTISTS, AND SCHOLARS FOR 150 YEARS

BY BARBARA BASBANES RICHTER

Iona Opie, esteemed folklorist and analyst of children's literature, once said that whenever she travels, a copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* goes along with her as an antidote to the anxiety of being in a strange place. Yet, for all its childlike whimsy, the novel penned by English mathematician Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, aka Lewis Carroll (1832–1898), is incredibly unsentimental, and firmly rooted in a world that, depending on the reader, depicts a marvelous fantasy or a total nightmare. Whatever Wonderland represents, it's still relevant: After 150 consecutive years in print, the classic shows no signs of age or obscurity, with celebrations and exhibitions taking place this year from Dubai to Austin in recognition of its enduring global appeal. Those in search of festivities nearby need look no further than www.Alice150.com.

New York City has full-blown *Alice* fever—the Morgan Library & Museum's summer exhibition on the novel's sesquicentennial overlapped with the launch of the Grolier Club's fall show devoted to *Alice* in translation, which was mounted in



COURTESY OF ALAN TANNENBAUM.

The original illustrator of *Alice*, John Tenniel, rendered this image of the March Hare and the Hatter putting the Dormouse's head into a teapot. Tenniel's iconic illustrations set the bar for all future illustrators of Carroll's masterpiece.

conjunction with the publication of a three-volume set of analysis and interpretation, *Alice in a World of Wonderlands: Translations of Lewis Carroll's Masterpiece* by Jon Lindseth and Alan Tannenbaum, editors. In O ctober, the Grolier's two-day colloquium on the *Alice* translations includes an esteemed lineup of academics, historians, authors, and illustrators.

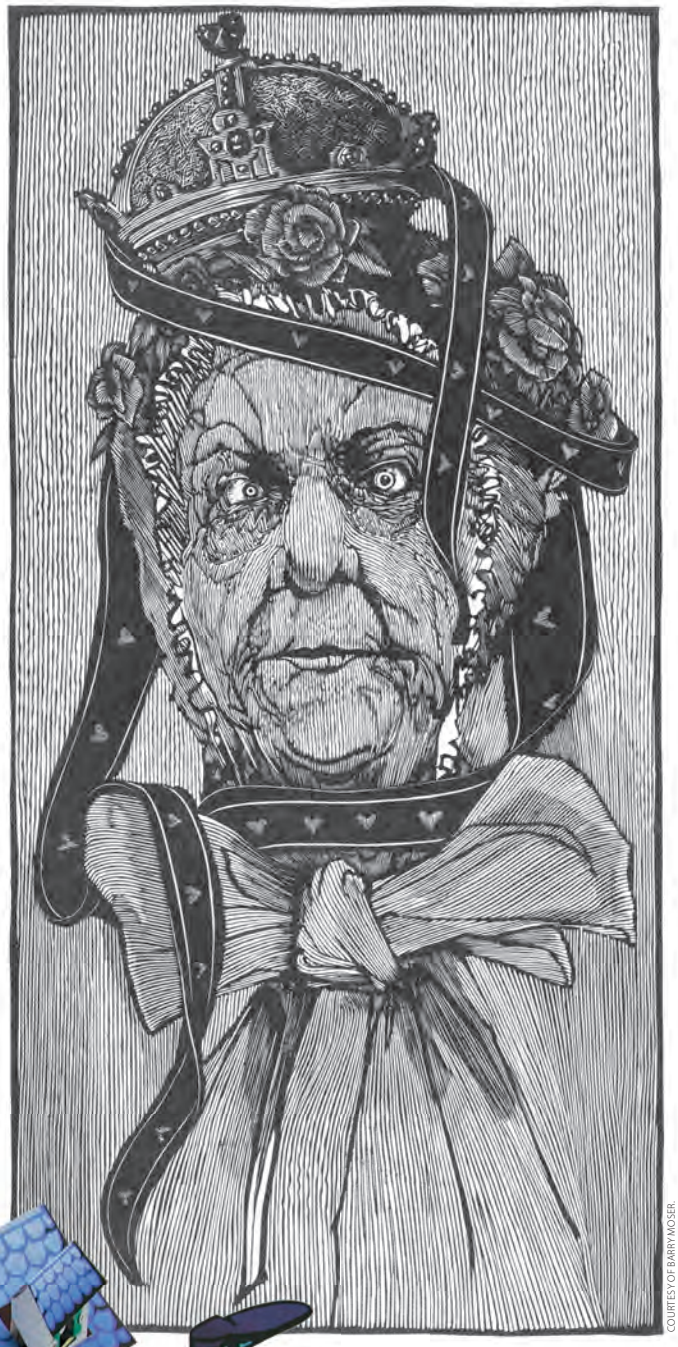
In translation, *Alice* integrates seamlessly into other cultures, languages, and societies, but, when back-translated into English, many of the stories would be almost unrecognizable to most readers familiar with the original. (An exception to this is the first French translation, completed in 1869 by a young man named Henri Bué, a son of one of Carroll's Oxford colleagues. Carroll supervised this work, and as a result, it is one of the few that hews very much to the original.) To date, *Alice* has been translated into 174 languages and dialects, ensuring its status as a worldwide sensation. It has also been translated multiple times in single languages—more than one hundred Japanese writers have taken a crack at the tale, all the more impressive considering most of the names have been changed, and the puns completely rewritten to make sense to Japanese readers. In 1964, when Warren Weaver published his groundbreaking work on translation, *Alice in Many Tongues*, there were forty-five translations of *Alice* into French. Now, there are 451.

For the major New York events, Jon A. Lindseth, former AER Energy Resources CEO and collector of all things *Alice,* is the man behind the curtain, organizing the various celebrations and serving as general editor of the three-volume œuvre. "We believe this project is the most extensive analysis ever done on one English novel," Lindseth said during a phone conversation earlier this year. "From the point of view of comparative linguistics, we feel this is going to be a powerful tool." Now, *Alice* is available in all six Celtic languages, Mongolian, Urdu, and Yiddish, as well Latin, Medieval Irish, and Medieval Breton, and even invented languages like Esperanto and Blissymbols. "For some of the translations, we're doing it for fun, and because we can," said Lindseth. "Some things just shouldn't be rationalized."

All joking aside, there is demonstrable use for translating the story into old languages and obscure dialects. For one thing, it's a fabulous opportunity for linguists to practice their skills. Lindseth's *Alice* translators tackled Chapter 7, "A

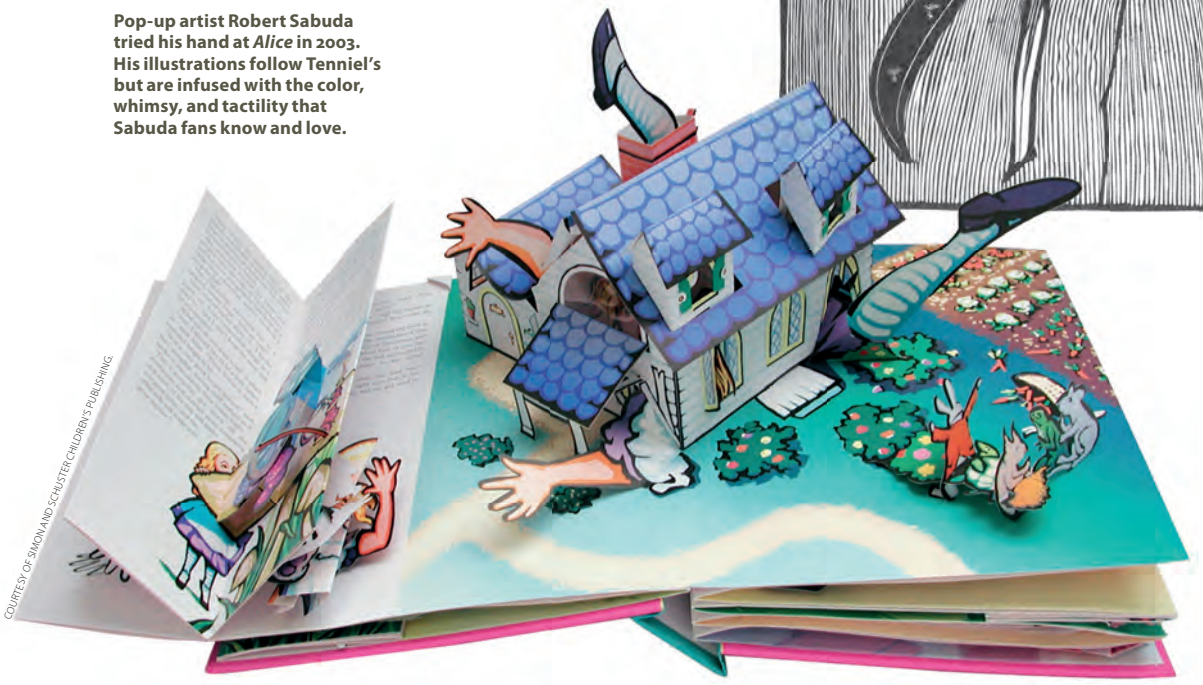
Mad Tea Party," precisely because of the challenges it presents. "There are at least a half dozen translation issues in the eight pages from the twinkle poem to when the Dormouse is stuck in the teapot," he said. "Carroll wrote to his publisher (Macmillan) saying that his Oxford friends thought the book was untranslatable because of all these difficult language matters." For instance, in a story the Dormouse tells during the tea party, three girls fall into a well, and the text reads, "Well how far in are they?" The answer is, "They're *well* in." To Lindseth's knowledge, that homophone exists in no other language, so no matter how that portion is translated, Carroll's humor is lost. A deft translator will craft a similar pun for his intended audience, so while the story might change (in some cases, quite drastically), Carroll's message breaks through language barriers and ingratiates itself into new cultures.

Estimated to be the third most widely quoted text in English (after the Bible and Shakespeare), *Alice* has something for every reader—nonsense, wordplay, puns for children, musings on universal themes (such as the passage of time and mortality), and logic puzzles for adults. But there's very little in the way of physical descriptions—Carroll was a master of moving the plot along—creating abundant opportunities to imagine the wacky splendor of Wonderland. For many readers, John Tenniel's now iconic illustrations set the bar, and most English-language editions reference his work in some form or another. Even as early as 1901, when American political cartoonist Peter Newell was commissioned to illustrate an edition for Harper and Brothers, he felt compelled to preface his drawings by acknowledging Tenniel as the standard-bearer. But Tenniel's grip on the public's imagination hasn't kept hundreds of artists, including Barry Moser, Helen Oxenbury, Salvador Dalì, and master paper engi-



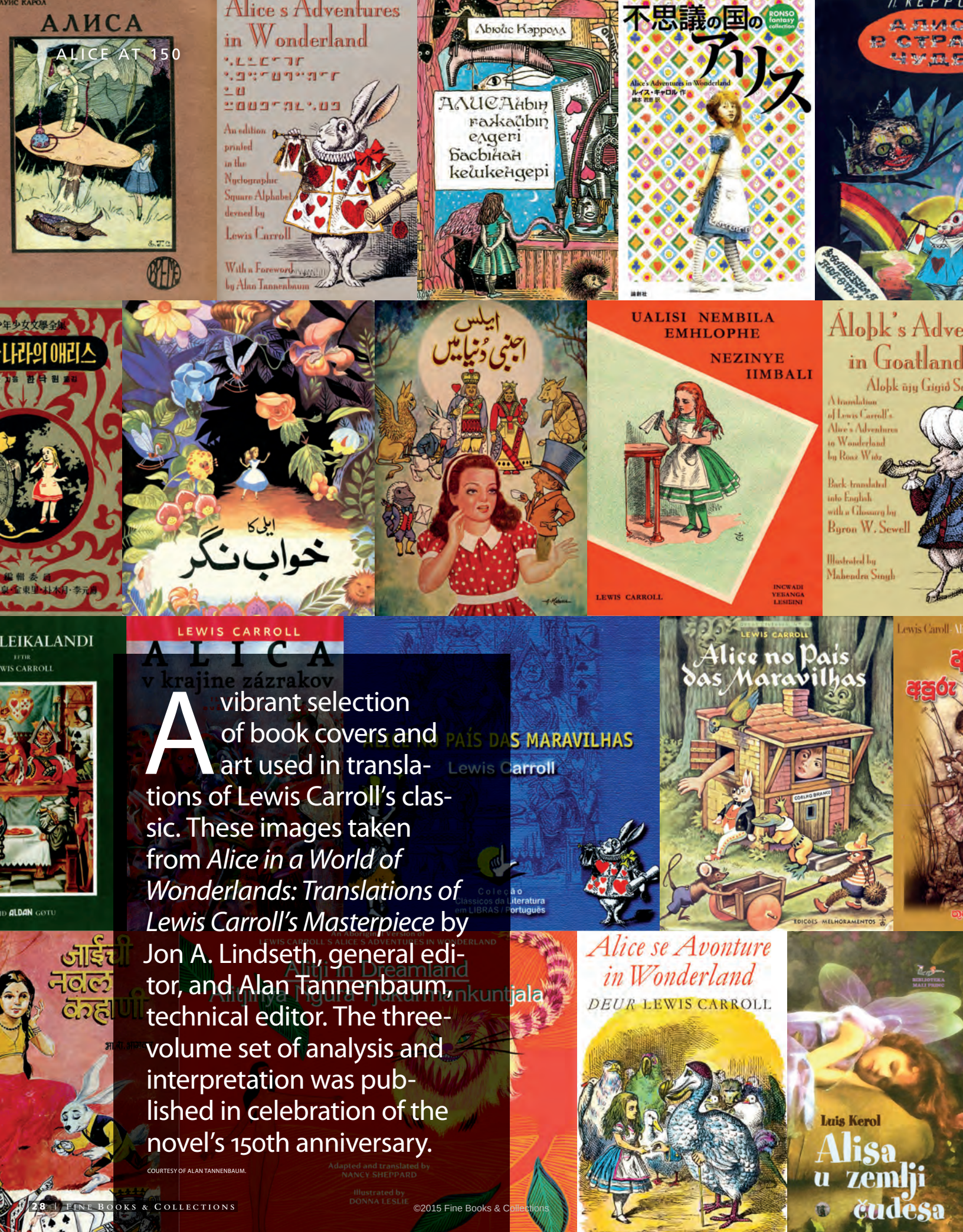
COURTESY OF BARRY MOSER.

Wood engraver Barry Moser's interpretation of *Alice*, first published in a limited edition by his Pennyroyal Press in 1982, offers a much darker and complex vision of Wonderland. His Queen of Hearts, pictured here, is unnerving. Moser's edition won the 1983 National Book Award for design and illustration.



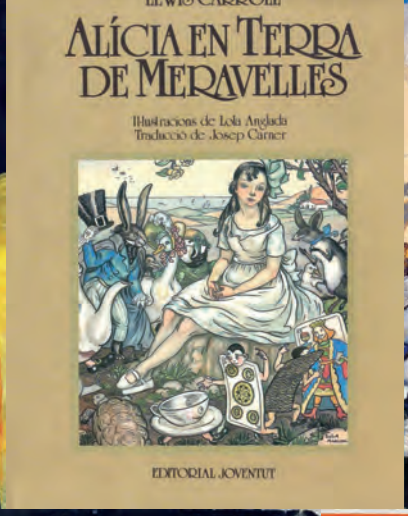
COURTESY OF SIMON AND SCHUSTER CHILDREN'S PUBLISHING.

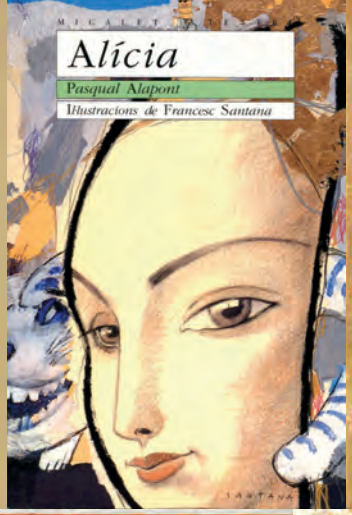
Pop-up artist Robert Sabuda tried his hand at *Alice* in 2003. His illustrations follow Tenniel's but are infused with the color, whimsy, and tactility that Sabuda fans know and love.

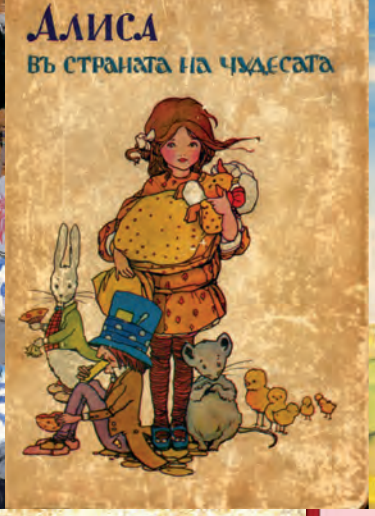


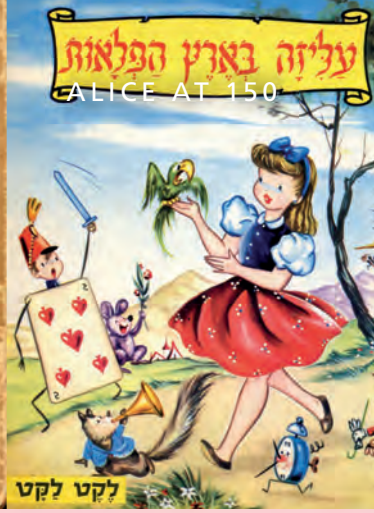
A vibrant selection of book covers and art used in translations of Lewis Carroll's classic. These images taken from *Alice in a World of Wonderlands: Translations of Lewis Carroll's Masterpiece* by Jon A. Lindseth, general editor, and Alan Tannenbaum, technical editor. The three-volume set of analysis and interpretation was published in celebration of the novel's 150th anniversary.

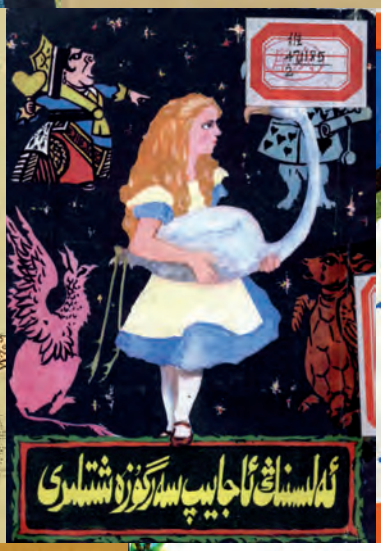
COURTESY OF ALAN TANNENBAUM.

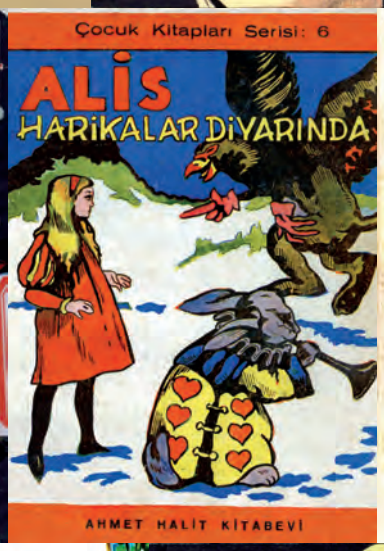


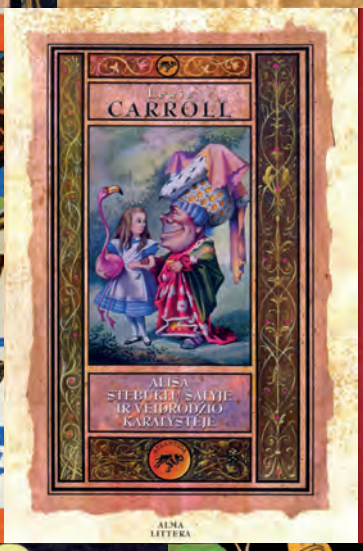


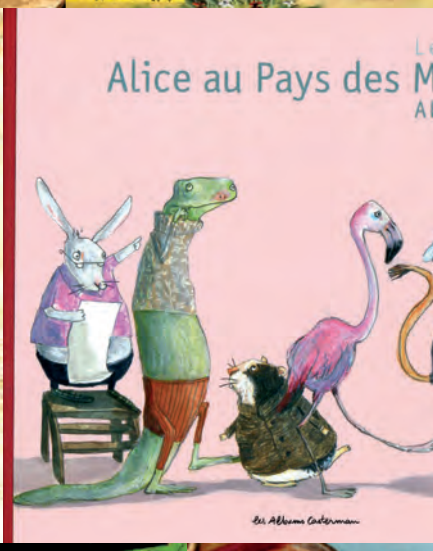


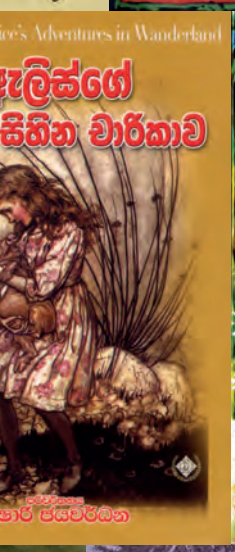


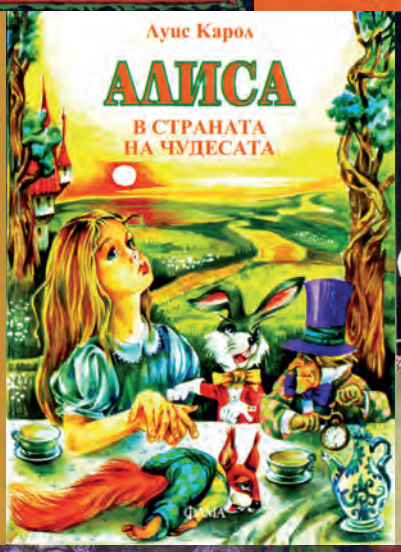


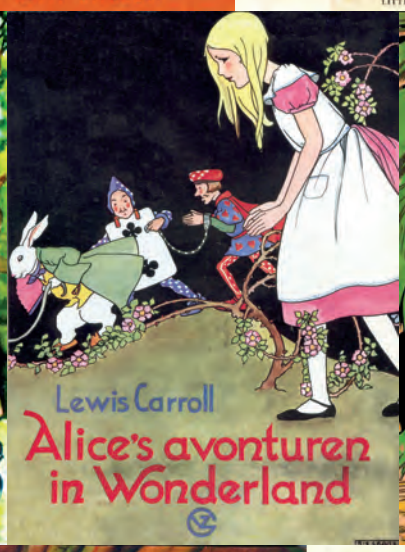


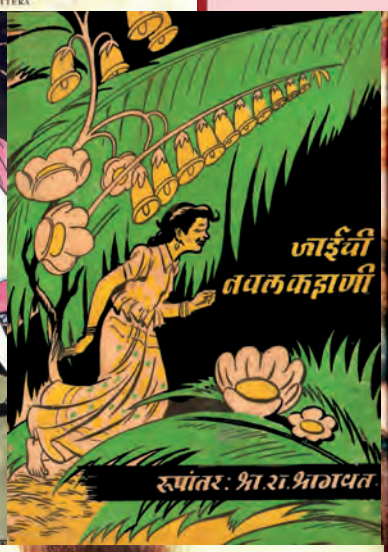


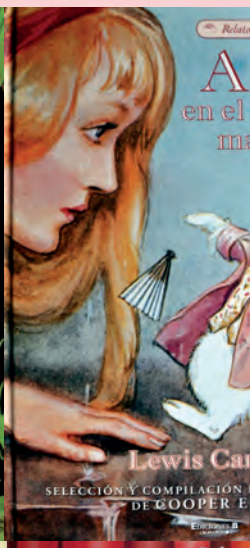


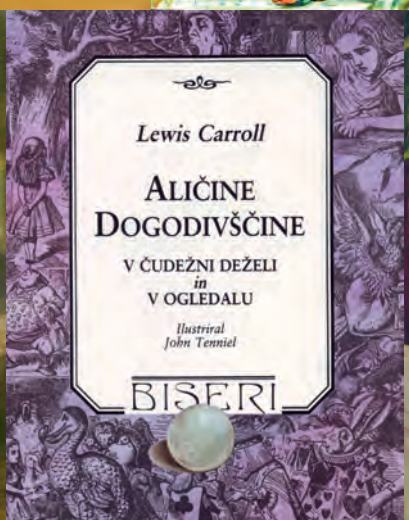


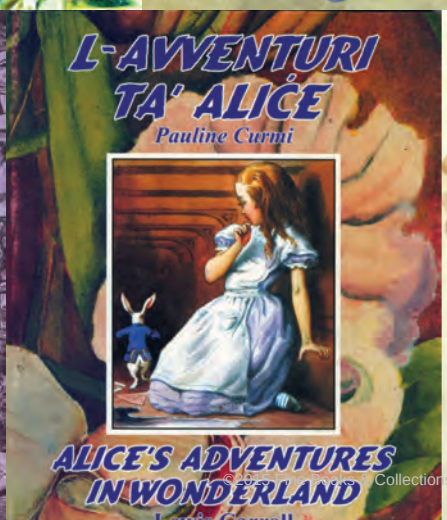


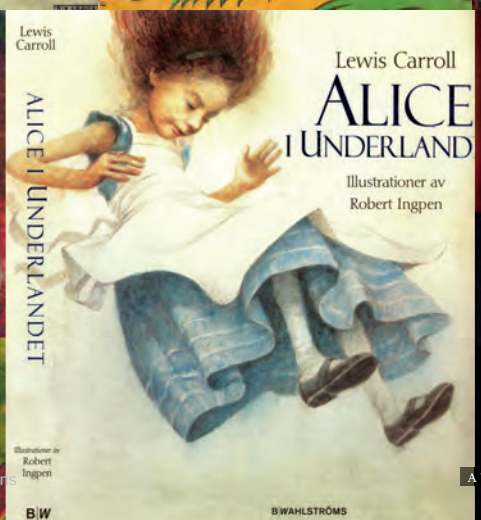








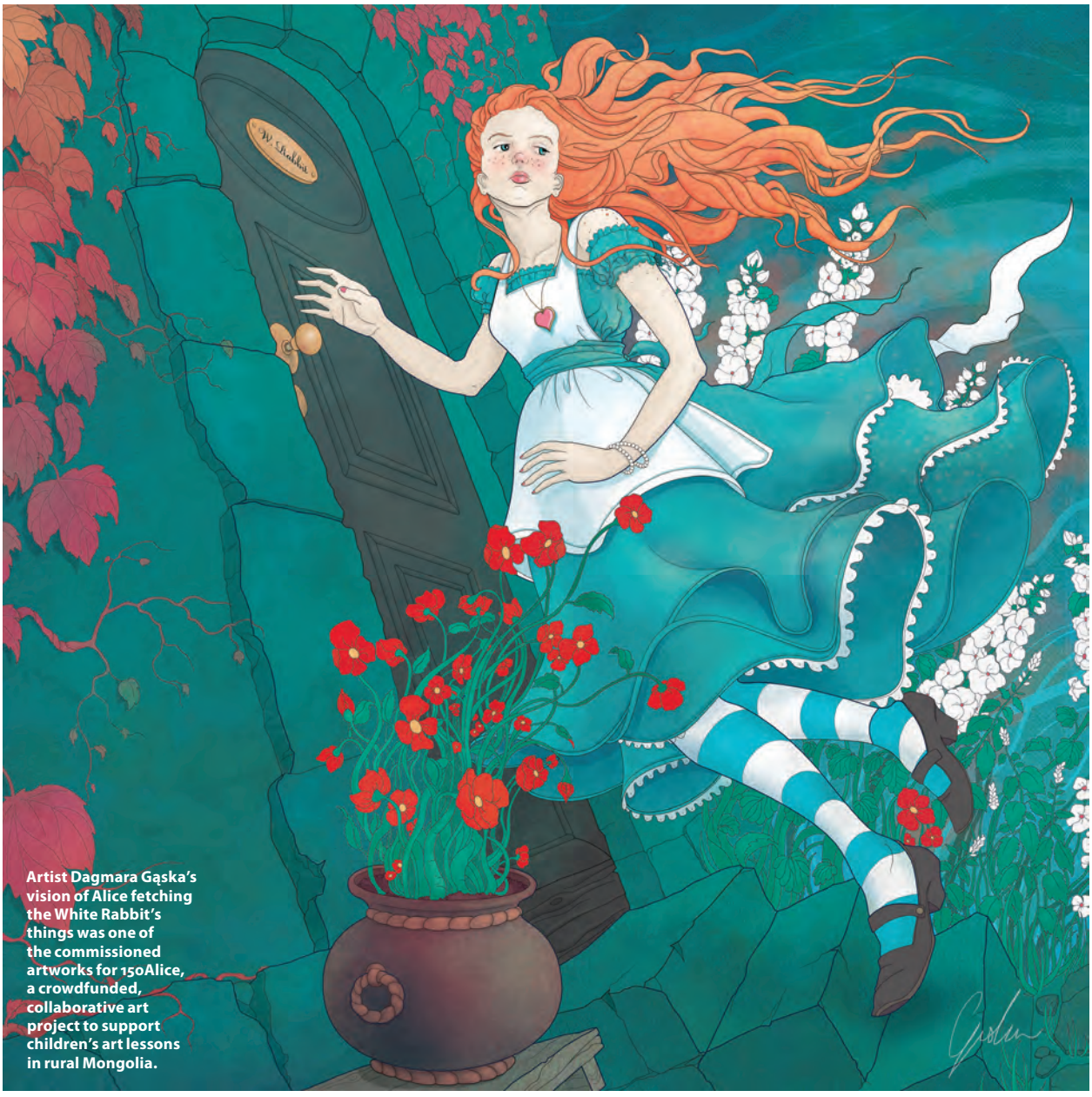




neer Robert Sabuda, from envisioning a new *Alice*. Most recently, Marcus Tan, a Carroll fan in Beijing, commissioned 150 illustrators from forty-two countries to illustrate a page of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Funded through IndieGoGo, the proceeds will benefit art and creative education programs in Mongolia.

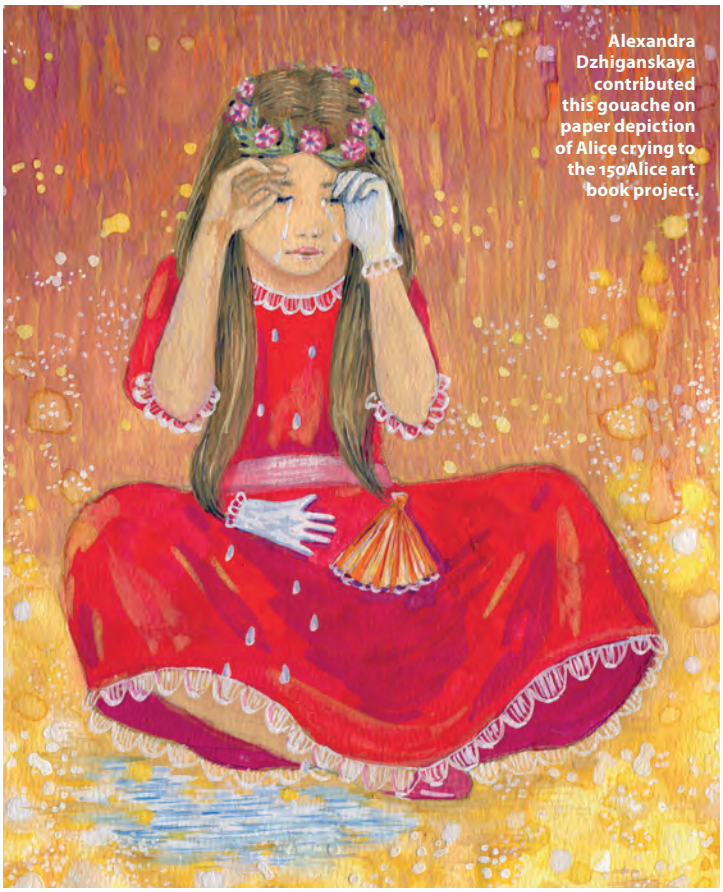
Stephanie Lovett, president of the North American chapter of the Lewis Carroll Society and architect of Alice150, said she finds that even modern and contemporary illustrators often pay reverence to Tenniel. "I wrote my dissertation on *Alice* and analyzed different illustrators and their work. I found that even if a modern illustrator chose to depict a character like the Duchess, we still tend to see the same moment in time originally put forth by Tenniel." In other words, somebody might come up with a Duchess that looks different from any other, but most likely, she still holds a baby in her lap, the cook holds a pot behind her, and Alice stands off to one side, looking surprised, just like Tenniel's rendering. "The same moments tend to dominate people's thinking," Lovett continued. "People don't even realize that they have the freedom to change because the Tenniel illustrations are just so loud in people's heads. The mock turtle is a joke on mock turtle soup (which was made out of veal), but it doesn't have to be the same visual gag that Tenniel did. There's no mention in the text of what it looks like except that it has flappers." Carroll didn't even offer an in-depth description of Alice. Readers glean that she doesn't have curly hair and that she wears a skirt (during her trial, she knocks over the jury box with it). "We don't even know if the Hatter is wearing a hat!" exclaimed Lovett.

As the oldest of eleven children, Carroll grew up performing magic shows, writing plays, and telling stories



Artist Dagmara Gąska's vision of Alice fetching the White Rabbit's things was one of the commissioned artworks for 150Alice, a crowdfunded, collaborative art project to support children's art lessons in rural Mongolia.

CREDIT: DAGMARA GĄSKA



CREDIT: ALEXANDRA DZHIGANSKAYA

Alexandra Dzhiganskaya contributed this gouache on paper depiction of Alice crying to the 150Alice art book project.

to his siblings. By the time he put *Alice* on paper, he had a pretty good idea of how to keep young readers entertained. "When you sit down and read to children, they do not want the boring parts where the author describes stuff—that's what the pictures are for!" Lovett enthused. In the very first sentence of *Alice,* readers learn that a book "without pictures or conversation" would be mightily boring. What would have happened if Alice's sister had been reading a rousing adventure tale full of great art? Would she have followed the White Rabbit?

As the book has gone through various editions, so too has Alice's dress, which demonstrates the book's ability to stay in step with the trends. Kiera Vaclavik, a lecturer in French and comparative literature at Queen Mary, University of London, wrote about how Alice's dress has evolved over 150 years for Lindseth's *Alice in a World of Wonderlands*. Vaclavik maintains that fashion and translation are intertwined. "Roland Barthes believed that fashion was a kind of language, so it makes sense to examine the changes Alice's appearance has undergone as it has moved through space and time." While preparing her essay, Vaclavik discovered the December 2003 issue of American *Vogue*, in which haute couture designers had been invited to design a dress for Alice, represented in the magazine by Russian supermodel Natalia Vodianova. "There is a very clear sense of what Alice looks like in popular imagination—blond hair, blue dress, white pinafore, black shoes—but that has been strongly shaped by the 1951 Disney animated film," said Vaclavik. "The Tenniel Alice is still well-known and the point of departure for all subsequent illustrations."

When Barry Moser composed his exquisitely dark, almost frightening woodcuts for the 1982 edition of the tale for his Pennyroyal Press, rather than riff on Tenniel's work, he went straight to the source—Carroll's own drawings and photographs. "I never cared for, nor do I yet care for the Tenniel illustrations," said Moser, in what some of his colleagues might consider blasphemy. "I often wonder what those images would have been if Mr. Carroll kept his nose out of Mr. Tenniel's business. Tenniel's images are not much more than better rendered versions of the drawings Carroll did in the holograph manuscript that he hand-wrote for little Miss Liddell." Carroll was a superb photographer, and although he could not draw well, he had very clear ideas of how Alice should appear and stood over Tenniel's shoulder. "I did not read Alice until I was forty years old," said Moser. "What I saw was a goddamned nightmare, not whimsy. So, yes, my images (I hope) have that kind of dark quality to them." Moser's edition ultimately won the 1983 National Book Award for design and illustration, and is itself regarded as a modern classic.

Part of the world's long-lasting infatuation with Carroll's story may stem from the fact that, though written by a Victorian, it still feels quite contemporary. The Alice150 project aims to dust off the author's persona while celebrating his work. "Carroll's dress and hair were old-fashioned, even for his time. He wore gloves and frock coats, and when we see him in pictures, he seems more removed than he was," said Lovett. "He should have been an Edwardian, a twentieth-century man." (Carroll died in 1898 at the age of sixty-five after a brief bout of bronchitis.) "His life almost exactly parallels that of James Whistler, who was very modern." Perhaps Carroll is better defined as what the French would call a *bricoleur*—the very opposite of an engineer, a jack-of-all-trades who made much from little. "Carroll viewed life as a kind of mosaic. He loved photography, he was a serious mathematician and logician too—a true polymath, and he felt that things don't have to be boring to be useful," Lovett added.

By that measure, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* nears perfection. Through the thousands of translations, interpretations, and illustrations, the book touches people worldwide and reminds readers that humanity's great gift is knowledge. Lovett summed it up best: "That you're not really free, that you're not really human until you have the tools to think and evaluate ideas for yourself, was essential to Carroll and his work." &

Barbara Basbanes Richter lives in New York, where she writes about all sorts of things, but mostly about books, and recently explored danger in children's literature for the spring 2015 "Alchemy of Print" issue of *The Sewanee Review.*