

What happens when you cross dark themes, fairy tales, mythology, performing arts, and Disney? You get a brilliant Danish born illustrator named Kay Nielsen. Nielsen is one of the few illustrators that didn't throw in puppies and sugar-plum fairies on to the canvas. Nielsen's handling of the grim and unearthly side of fairy tales was spectacular. His watercolors and ink masterfully brought a theatrical composition to his illustrations. Nielsen's work will also be forever immortalized in the stories told by Disney. Nielsen may have just been a small stone being thrown in the still waters of the artistic world, but the lasting ripples will insure he will never be forgotten.

Born in 1886 Copenhagen, Denmark, Kay Nielsen was born into a family that was already in the creative realm. "Nielsen described being raised in a 'tense atmosphere of art'" (Melvin). Nielsen got his formal education from the Académie Julian in Paris in 1904-1911. After his tutelage in French, Nielsen moved to London and began his illustration career. "This was Nielsen's 'big break' and he provided twenty-four beautiful colour plates and more than fifteen monotone illustrations for *In Powder and Crinoline, Fairy Tales Retold* by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (published in 1913)" (Unknown). After WW1, books and illustrators took a big hit in Europe and Nielsen could not afford to live off of his commissions. He moved back to Copenhagen and leaped back into the performing arts. He was in charge of poster designs, costumes, and set designs. "Nielsen's life-long immersion in theater reflected in his illustrations, many of which could readily be translated to the stage" (Melvin). In 1936, Nielsen went to California to help a friend in Hollywood theatrical companies with set designs and costuming. And that is where he was scooped up by Walt Disney. Nielsen was a brilliant concept artist for Disney. Next time you watch Disney's 1940 *Fantasia*, be sure to give *Night on Bald Mountain* and *Ave Maria* a closer look. Nielsen was also part of the concept crew for Disney's *Little Mermaid*, but he didn't live to see it come to life. Unfortunately, Disney fired Nielsen in 1941 due to WW2. Nielsen's style and process wasn't fast enough to be "economical" (Knapp). After being let go, Nielsen would bounce between Denmark and America with very little money and little more success. Nielsen died in 1957 with a handful of commissioned murals left behind.

Nielsen's style is flat, colorful and expressive. He broke ranks when he would depict the darker and messier side of fairy tales. I see hints of Chinese and Japanese styles mixed with Celtic and Grecian styles. Nielsen is one of the founding fathers of the Art Nouveau movement. The graphic design and the elaborate costumes of the characters are breathtaking. His masterful skill with watercolor creates a dreamlike feel to the illustrations. Nielsen's line work and use of lines and curves brings you from one end of the page to the other without missing a beat. You can see his love for Nordic mythology with his work in *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*. Without Nielsen, in my opinion, Disney's films would not have been so powerful without Nielsen's concepts. Without Nielsen, advertisement illustration would not have brought the Art Nouveau and Art Deco masters to the States. We owe him our thanks.

Kay Nielsen's life started off pretty start forward. He became a master illustrator and brilliant storyteller. He made a huge impact on Walt Disney and the animation movement that helped bring Disney to the heights that it is today. I wish I knew about Kay Nielsen sooner. He deserves to be remembered as the great illustrator and artist that he is. Thank you Mr. Nielsen.



Illustration in *In Powder and Crinoline* 1912



Illustration in *East of the Sun and West of the Moon* 1914



Illustration in *East of the Sun and West of the Moon* 1914

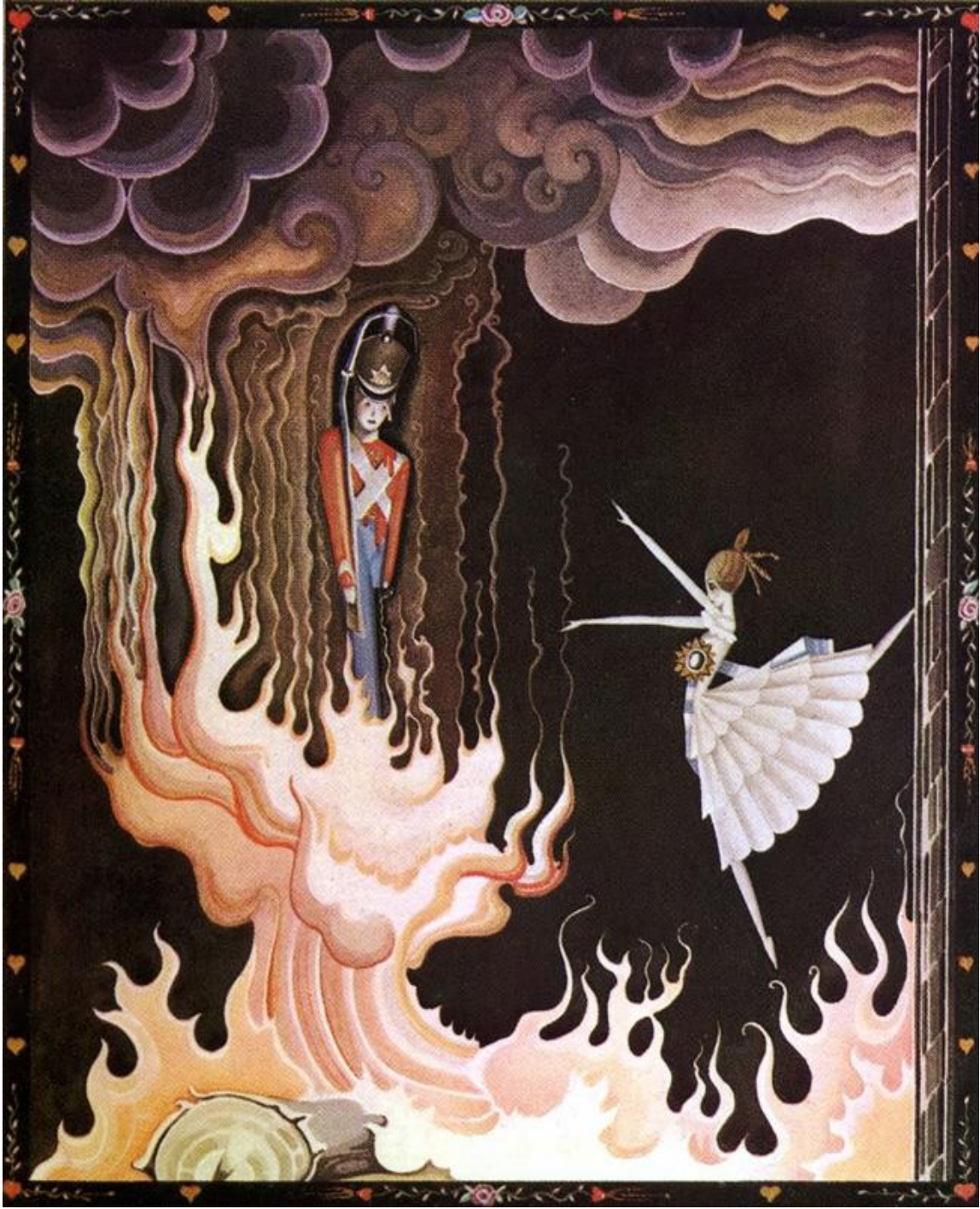


Illustration for *The Hardy Tin Soldier*



Illustration *East of the Sun and West of the Moon* 1914



Illustration in *East of the Sun and West of the Moon* 1914



Concept Art for *Little Mermaid* (Images Above and Below)





Concept art for Fantasia 1940 (Above and Below)



Work Cited

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