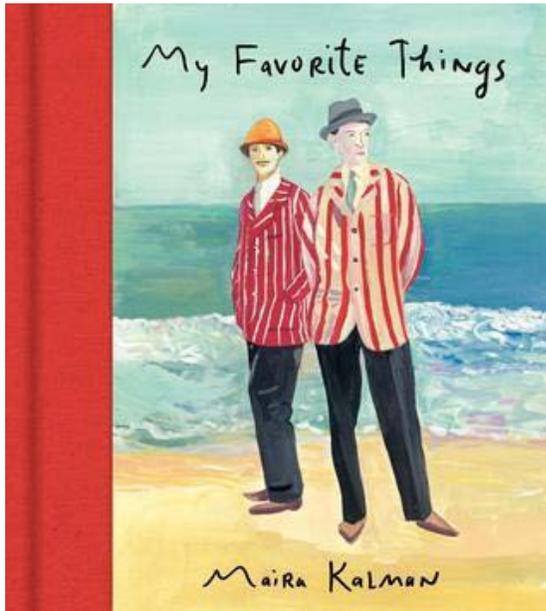


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The magical lure of the material world comes joyously alive in Maira Kalman’s ‘My Favorite Things’



Harper Design

By Karen Sandstrom

My mother, Marge Sandstrom, loved beautiful objects. A quintessential housewife in the 1950s mold, she filled her elegantly appointed home with pretty blue-and-white China, Irish crystal, porcelain birds, plus the occasional touch of whimsy. A stone dog at the front wore a red bow around its neck at Christmas.

This was all so reassuring and lovely that it didn’t occur to me till after she died that some might consider these acquisitions a bit . . . materialistic. As soon as the notion popped into my head, I tried to shove it aside. Not my mother! She wasn’t showy; she was dear and loving. She just also happened to love beautiful stuff. Right?

I needed Maira Kalman to help me to sort it all out. Kalman understands the importance of things. She understands why we’re drawn to them and that our craving for material objects might be defensible, desirable or at least inevitable.

She makes that case in “My Favorite Things” (Harper Design, 160 pp., \$35), a new book of her gouache paintings and handwritten observations. The book itself will become a beloved thing for some.

A longtime illustrator of books for children and adults, and a frequent contributor to The New Yorker canon of cover art, Kalman also is a designer whose singular voice made her the perfect choice to curate an exhibit of 56 objects at the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum in New York. “Maira Kalman Selects” will be on view through June 2015. The call to do the show forms the backbone of “My Favorite Things.”

“Like a shopper in some great, mad department store that housed many centuries’ worth of objects, I browsed and inspected their archives for a year or so,” writes Kalman. “The pieces that I chose were based on one thing only – a gasp of delight.”

Thus begins the story, so deceptively simple that on first read it doesn’t even feel like a story – more like an extended, illustrated list of objects, from the plain to the fancy. Yet Kalman interweaves this with the stuff of her own life: a few pages of biography dotted with details that imply how she became someone whose memories are anchored by material objects.

In the middle, she gives us a tour of the curated objects – pots and chairs and textiles and books and shoes and lamps. She paints them (even the paintings), and she photographs them and she draws out their power to evoke memory and relationships and singular moments.

On one page, she paints the black cloth used at Abraham Lincoln’s funeral. “Here is the pall that covered his coffin,” she writes. “Adding fringes was a decision someone had to make.”

Kalman takes infectious pleasure in examining even a simple metal grater, with which her mother shredded spuds for potato pancakes. She adores the weird as well, as we learn in the spread dedicated to the very large trousers of conductor Arturo Toscanini, which Kalman bought at auction.

But it’s her illustration style that nails down the case. Kalman uses rich, vibrant colors for her stylized renderings. Their flat surfaces nod toward primitivism, but her bold palette and brushstrokes are a brilliant combination of sophistication and whimsy. Here is how children, in their wisdom, see the world. Here is the vision most of us lose as we age.

Her style, I might add, would not have been to my mother’s taste. The edginess I find so appealing in Kalman’s work would’ve seemed garish and unrefined to Marge. But on this, Maira and Marge would’ve agreed: The stuff of life can be the source of great pleasure and meaning. There’s no sin in that.

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