

BIOGRAPHY

Lila Prap graduated in architecture from the Faculty of Architecture, Civil Engineering, and Geodesy in Ljubljana. While working as an architect, she began creating visual art, focusing primarily on caricature. She published her work in various Slovenian newspapers, and caricature became the basis for a series of works she exhibited in 1996 at the ŠKUC Gallery. That same year, she presented caricatures on architectural themes at the Jakopič Pavilion and later at the School of Architecture in Yazd, Iran.

Caricature introduced her to the world of children's illustration. After creating short comics for children, she began writing short stories with accompanying illustrations. In 1998, after visiting the Bologna Book Fair, she submitted her illustrations and was selected for an exhibition featuring 100 illustrators from around the world. Two years later, she exhibited there again; on that occasion, the Art Institute of Chicago chose her as one of ten representative illustrators worldwide.

Following these selections, her work shifted toward creating original picture books. She illustrates only her own texts, as they are an integral part of her message. She has received several awards for her work, including the Levstik Award, the Hinko Smrekar Award, and the Prešeren Fund Award.

Lila Prap
DINOSAURS, BIRDS, DRAGONS, AND CHICKENS
24 April–30 May 2026

artKIT, Glavni trg 14, Maribor
Opening hours: Tuesday to Friday from 3 to 7 p.m., Saturday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

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The artistic oeuvre of Lilijana Praprotnik Zupančič is organically embedded within the continuum of Slovenian illustration, which developed throughout the 20th century into a key area of national visual expression. In this tradition, shaped by prominent Slovenian artists, illustration transcends its functional role and becomes an autonomous visual field, where the image co-creates, carries, and sustains the narrative.

Lila Prap's visual language is restrained and considered, based on simplicity and carefully measured gesture. Within this pictorial structure, space opens for the artist's poetics, grounded in meticulously rendered detail and the tension between clearly defined form and what remains ambiguous.

The artKIT exhibition space presents a selection of illustrations created for the books *Dinosaurs?!*, *Birds?!*, and *Dragons?!*. For the exhibition, the artist has selected fifteen original illustrations executed in dry pastel on black paper. The works are organized into thematic groups: five images of dragons, five of birds, and five of dinosaurs. As an installation, the series opens a field of inquiry between natural, mythological, and prehistoric imagery, establishing a distinctive dialogue between the real, the fantastical, and the archetypal.

Prap's visual language, both fantastical and realistic, is instantly recognizable and internally consistent, characterized by pronounced sensitivity to color, form, composition, and narrative clarity. A central feature of her approach is the emphatic two-dimensionality of the pictorial surface, which serves as a clearly structured field. Spatial illusion gives way to planar expression, with a uniform monochrome background providing a stable visual ground while simultaneously eliminating and refining any sense of depth. This chromatic unity directs the viewer's attention to the central motif, which typically occupies the center of the composition. Such an arrangement creates a clear compositional order and reinforces perceptual coherence.

One of the key visual emphases of her work is its chromatic conception, grounded in monochromatic backgrounds. These backgrounds are not merely passive backdrops but active carriers of the atmosphere and mood of each illustration. The choice of a single dominant color filling the pictorial field creates a sense of homogeneity and density, within which the central motif emerges. This reduction of the color palette also allows focus on the essential and lends an intensified, almost intoxicating quality to the pastel medium.

Pastel on black paper reveals a ground that permeates the layers of color, creating internal tension within the pictorial surface. On the dark support, the color layers appear optically condensed, gaining intensity and chromatic depth. This interplay between ground and application produces a visible dynamism of color, which appears as a living, pulsating substance.

At the same time, the pastel technique enables soft modulation of tones, subtle transitions, and rich layering, inviting the viewer to a more attentive perception of color and surface.

In this context, contour becomes prominent. In Lila Prap's work, it is not a drawn line but emerges from the interaction between the color application and the black paper ground. The dark edge surrounding figures and individual forms is not added afterward; it appears as an exposed part of the support – a trace of the black paper that remains visible along the edges of the color fields. Contour is established as negative space that both defines and activates form. It functions as both a boundary and a structural element, constructing the pictorial field while intensifying the presence of color. Similarly, the outer edge is not an additional line but the visible black ground of the support, which physically delineates the pictorial field. This edge establishes a boundary between the world of the illustration and the viewer's space, while also enabling a connection between the two. The illustration thus becomes an autonomous space of narration, retaining its distinctive intensity.

The works are composed with deliberation and balance. The consistent use of a horizontal format evokes a sense of narrative unfolding, well suited to the flow of a picture book. The central placement of the motif provides stability and clarity, which is especially important for children's perception. The animal figures are depicted in full, allowing immediate recognition. Such complete presentation serves a didactic purpose, enabling children to grasp the form and character of each creature directly.

Another important aspect is how the figures establish a relationship with the viewer. The animals' gazes are often directed outward, creating a direct connection between the image and the observer. This visual contact goes beyond mere representation, entering the realm of interaction and dialogue. Thus, the animal images gain not only a narrative function but also expressive force, enabling an emotional form of communication.

For a child encountering visual art for the first time through picture books, animal imagery provides a stimulating field of perception. Illustration offers a framework for orientation, recognition, and interpretation, while fostering sensitivity to visual quality. In this way, the artist's work makes an important contribution to the development of early visual culture. Her work holds a prominent place in contemporary illustration because of its deliberate engagement with the child's imagination. Prap's illustrations allow the image to be read as a structured whole and directly support the development of visual literacy. The child recognizes the central motif, follows the composition, and understands the relationship between figure and background. The chromatic unity of the background directs the gaze, contour defines boundaries, and central placement establishes orientation.

Animal figures serve as a central anchor in Prap's artistic process. They function as mediators between the child and the complexity of the world. In the books, a rooster, a hen, chicks, and a chicken appear, introducing questions and answers in speech bubbles with humor and distinct character. This approach shapes a basic understanding of relationships and encourages observation of differences and similarities.

Picture books create a unique relationship between the stillness of the image and the dynamism of the narrative. A visual scene – such as a dragon breathing fire or confronting a Viking – is, in its appearance, fixed and spatially suspended. Yet within the structure of certain illustrations, there is a clear suggestion of movement, tension, or action. In this space between static visual form and perceived dynamism, a key moment of the image emerges, one in which the image opens onto narrative. The reader thus reaches a point of concentration that serves as the starting

point for mental and imaginative unfolding. This process continues in the space between image and interpretation, through the immediate perception of the image, where the visual stimulus triggers mental completion, openness, and a sense of the scene's temporality. In this way, the illustration functions as a generative structure, guiding the viewer toward the active construction of what follows and what lies beyond what is immediately shown.

Lila Prap's oeuvre serves as a quiet yet decisively formative force, shaping aesthetic experience and establishing the fundamental conditions of visual thought. Her visual language, though seemingly simple, develops into a consistent artistic idiom that transcends generational and cultural boundaries while maintaining a strong visual identity and clarity. Through its restrained expressiveness, it creates a far-reaching and lasting visual impact, positioning her work as a key reference point in contemporary Slovenian illustration.

– Nina Šardi