

# THE Curious Frenchy

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## Mary Beth McAllister: An American illustrator in love with life in the French Garden



As a French person, I am always touched to meet Francophiles who instinctively experience and interpret the essence of our culture and deliver it back to us with a modern twist. As a world citizen, I migrate towards those with a positive nature and I am inspired by their journey as they push through artistic challenges to thrive. It's why I was immediately charmed by the creations of [Mary Beth McAllister](#), affectionately known as Mb.

Mb is a designer of all things French, gourmand and garden. She sees the world in Technicolor and enjoys delighting both children and adults alike with her drawings. Her journey includes numerous juried Designer Show houses, sculptures based upon her illustrated characters, furniture, home accessories and numerous collections of drawings. Her inspiration is derived from her magical childhood garden, travels through France and a passionate appreciation of the work of French illustrators. The storyteller in Mb led her to create Les Gardiens du Jardin, a collection of drawings in gouache and ink of French characters inspired by packets of garden seeds.

The French Cultural Center in Boston hosted an early summer exhibition. Growing demand has caused Mb to introduce a very limited edition of fine art prints and [custom notecards](#) available through her website. I am happy to introduce her whimsical universe and appreciate her pulling back the curtain in her studio for me.

**How did you start your career and what was your artistic journey?**

I started a small business in NYC in my 20's with a \$5.00 investment and a desire to create something lyrical and organic. The result was gold silk leafy accessories and an order from Henri Bendel and other boutiques. Coverage by WWD, Harper's Bazaar and Vogue was a treasure. Simultaneously, I designed promotional gifts for cosmetic and fragrance companies such as Oscar de la Renta, which involved creating aprons for sales girls out of organdy with lavender piping for a fragrance launch. A marriage and move to the country allowed for a natural progression into interiors. I painted murals, faux finishes, furniture, custom gifts and painted floor cloths. Numerous juried Designer Show houses provided a venue to design spaces in my style. The basis for each show house was always my illustration: I love to draw and tell stories especially in gouache and ink.



**Where does the French influence come from?**

Sneaking into a side door at the Prêt-à-Porter, Paris during university had an enormous impact, the magic of it all. I studied and still covet the works of J.J. Grandville. I adore French satire. Hitchhiking through France with my sister, subsisting on wine, cheese, baguettes, chocolates and gitanes nailed it.

**Your collection “Les Gardiens du Jardin” is very unique: can you present these cute characters?**

Les Gardiens du Jardin is a collection of French characters inspired by and fashionably dressed as packets of garden seeds. They masquerade as landscape architects, run Soupe Populaire, teach tiny seed packets, and have been known to commit a prank or two. They are from Paris or from Provence and slip easily in and out of the worlds of gourmand and garden. Even in work, they experience a joie de vivre! I used to sew, not well, but intently. I have portfolios of linen and silk dresses and luncheon suits I designed in my late 20's to show the Creative Director of Vogue. They are expressed in my drawings.

**What is your dream project?**

Design the windows at Bergdorf Goodman. It would flutter and delight, I'm sure of it.



### How do you get inspired for your new creations?

I devour cookbooks and enjoy reading *The Private Life of Plants* by Attenborough. Museums are for inspecting French linen mattes. Rubbing out gold leaf over red bole puts me in a mindset to create stories in my head. Sempé, the French illustrator simply slays me. On Sundays I like to create little gifts made of olive oil and pansies. A wonderful smocked silk lampshade I find at an outdoor market can become a dress in one of my drawings.

**Do you have an anecdote that you'd like to share?** When I approached the sculpture studio they politely and gingerly asked me if I had ever worked in clay. Not even a coffee mug I replied. They hid their dismay well and encouraged me through my many clay kiln disasters until we ended up with just what I wanted, a sculpture of my French Gardener with his straw hat!



**What is the question you're asked the most?** Why aren't you illustrating books? I happen to be writing and illustrating a cookbook about herbs. I don't have a publisher yet, but I never knew how to do sculpture either! I am hoping to find a wonderful publisher in France or the U.S.

**What is the question you'd like to be asked?** WHEN are you designing the windows for Bergdorf Goodman?



**What are your projects for the coming months?** Currently, I am launching a custom designed pochette based upon Les Gardiens du Jardin characters which will be for sale on my website Fall 2017. I am also working on a collection of drawings based on garden bandits which are satirical in nature and some of which speak to the pesticide vs. organic tug of war. They seem to follow a natural progression from The Garden Keepers and Les Gardiens du Jardin, although I did not plan it that way. I have also completed Part 1 of a trilogy on life in a garden, a manuscript waiting for illustration. I just finished an oil painting entitled “The march of the parched

earth”. It is organic and colorful in nature and includes red shoes! I adore my clients and custom work for them. I designed and hand painted personal itineraries for a client's birthday trip to Scotland. I wish I could have seen the faces on her friends when they found them in their rooms! I am a working artist. Like my characters, I work for food!

Contact information

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