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Iconic Illustration

Studying how symbolic images have influenced contemporary illustration. - Joseph O'Reilly

Icons in the modern world are symbols that hold meaning beyond just their image. As an avid computer user I interact with icons every day on both the internet and my desktop. However icons don't just exist in the digital world. They are also used nearly everywhere around us. John Berger said that

"Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognises before it can speak." 1

In his book, *Ways of Seeing*. From childhood we are taught to understand icons and their meanings, the sign for toilet and lifts for example are global.

An illustration is a visualisation such as a drawing, painting, photograph or other work of art that stresses subject more than form. Illustration is a method of adding meaning or ornamentation to something textual. As humans we are taught from a very young age the meaning of various symbols. These symbols have been developed over thousands of years. The first icons can be traced back roughly 32,000 years, to hand art that was created in caves by ancient humans.

These icons were messages to fellow humans as a method to pass on information about their surroundings. For example we see images of packs of animals on the walls of caves, we can assume that these would be used to suggest that those particular animals live nearby. There are large levels of details present in the animals we can recognise even today.

In the first chapter of my study I want to investigate the ways that iconic images have influenced contemporary illustration. First I will look at early cave art and the meanings of some of the symbols. I will also look for modern equivalents to cave art, for example graffiti and street art. I am then going to do some research into human development with the hope that I can understand the importance symbols have within the mind.

In the second chapter I am going to research an artist who has created images with strong symbolic meanings. Carlos Schwabe¹ creates images that are full of deep symbolic meaning. I want to develop an understanding of his work by studying a piece of it in detail, and possibly contrasting his work to other artists. I will use chapter three as an opportunity to look at a media I'm not familiar with, such as film and video, sculpture or even watercolour and see what if any influences they've had upon contemporary illustration.

Finally I will summarise my research, studies and work into an answer for the question.

How Have Symbolic Images Influenced Contemporary Illustration?

1. **Ways of Seeing** 1972 - Chapter 1 - Page 7
John Berger, Penguin Books

icon /ˈɪkɒn/ | -k(ə)n/

noun

a painting of Jesus Christ or another holy figure, typically in a traditional style on wood, venerated and used as an aid to devotion in the Byzantine and other Eastern Churches.

- a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol of something : *this iron-jawed icon of American manhood.*
- Computing a symbol or graphic representation on a video display terminal of a program, option, or window, esp. one of several for selection.
- Linguistics a sign whose form directly reflects the thing it signifies, for example, the word *snarl* pronounced in a snarling way.

ORIGIN mid 16th cent. (in the sense [simile]): via Latin from Greek *eikōn* 'likeness, image.'
Current senses date from the mid 19th cent. onward.

illustration /ɪləˈstreɪʃ(ə)n/

noun

a picture illustrating a book, newspaper, etc. : *an illustration of a yacht.*

- an example serving to clarify or prove something : *this accident is a graphic illustration of the disaster that's waiting to happen.*
- the action or fact of illustrating something, either pictorially or by exemplification : *by way of illustration, I refer to the following case.*

DERIVATIVES

illustrational adjective

ORIGIN late Middle English (in the sense [illumination; spiritual or intellectual enlightenment]): via Old French from Latin *illustratio(n-)*, from the verb *illustrare* (see **illustrate**).

Where's the remote!

Chapter One

Early Cave Art

Many millennia ago humans couldn't communicate in the myriad of textual and vocal ways we do today. One assumes that if a hunter wanted to leave a message to tell others about what animals had been seen nearby he would have to create something visual. I think this is why we see cave paintings the world over. I feel that it was a necessity for early humans to share information with one another in this medium. It's the neolithic equivalent of leaving a note on the fridge.



While there is still some debate as to how old these paintings are, and to whether they are meaningful or just artistic expression, it's clear that they represent an important step in the development of the human mind not unlike the Venus Figurines.

This all connects with modern day illustration, a method of adding meaning or ornamentation. Cave paintings are similar to graffiti, a form of street art that uses a can of spray paint and occasionally a stencil. In cities the world over gangs use graffiti to mark territories and warn rivals. Graffiti in this sense is form out of function, the people who create these urban murals are no different from those who design websites or illustrate novels. They are all adding meaning, explaining or ornamenting something, whether it is a dilapidated building or a crisp page of type.

Where's the remote!

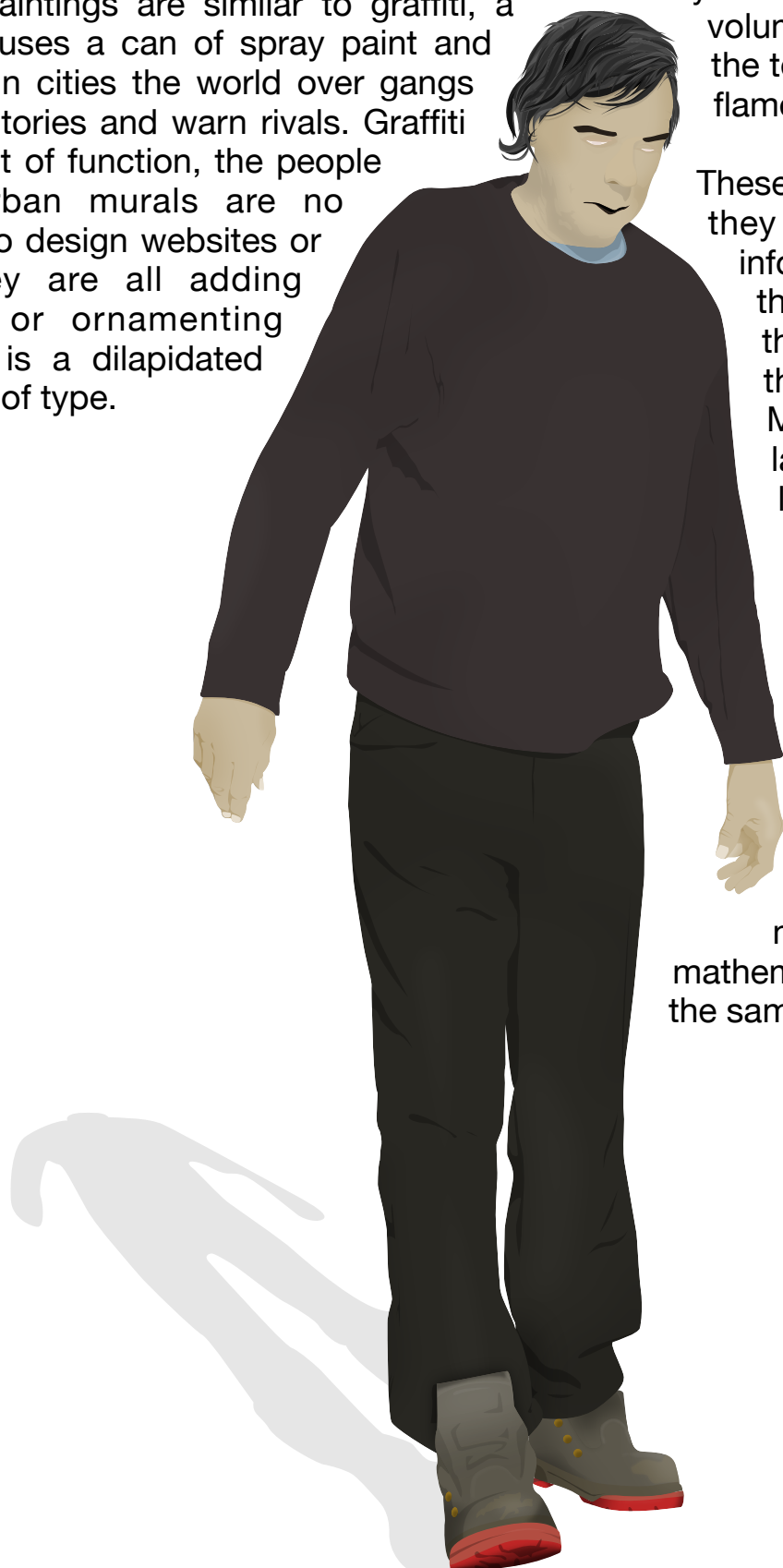
In the modern world we are confronted with symbols which are sown into our subconscious at a young age. Most have a a very literal meaning, like the symbol often used for power on electronic devices. A combination of Zero and One, which are the only two states in a binary system, on and off. Some other examples of this are volume controls which often show stylised speakers or the temperature controls on a cooker which often have flames at various sizes.

These modern symbols are very like cave art in that they were created to give meaning, or convey information simply and easily. While it's clear that these symbols alone were not enough to hold all the information we wanted to record, it's interesting that they still hold such importance in our lives. Modern symbols are specialised tools that span languages allowing foreigners in any country to locate a toilet or airport.

The simplistic style of symbol we have come to recognise is a direct result of the necessity of our forefathers. Because they had to share information with each other about sources of food and the number of dangerous animals that lived nearby, we now don't have to struggle when we are lost abroad. Computers are simplified under a global symbolic language, crosses mean cancel or close while padlocks mean you are secure. The same can be said of mathematics where plus, minus, times and divide stay the same wherever you go.

Frankenstein

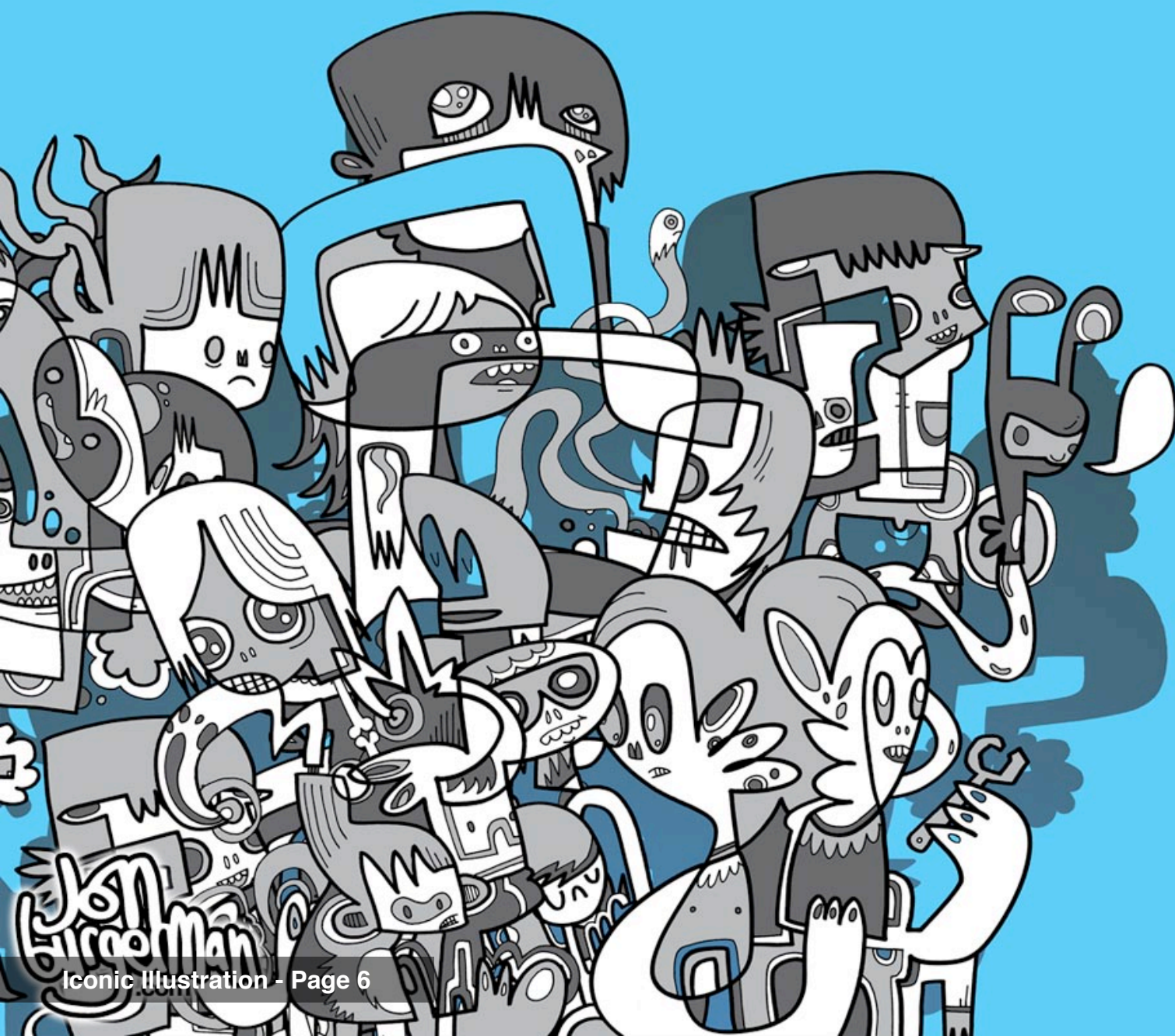
Joseph O'Reilly





Old vs New

Some carvings made into rock, and illustration by Jon Burgerman.





A Modern Day Icon

Joseph O'Reilly

Le Mort du Fossoyeur

Chapter Two

Carlos Schwabe

The symbols of the modern world aren't very different to those that were created 32,000 years ago, strong obvious meanings intended to convey important information quickly. Carlos Schwabe's work however, requires deeper thought before you can unravel its meaning. To demonstrate this I am going to investigate the painting, *Le Mort du Fossoyeur*.

Le Mort du Fossoyeur 4

At first glance when we look at this painting we see a dark winged figure standing over a man, the grave digger, holding a glowing green object. The grave is situated below a willow tree, and in the ground we can see some graves, several of which are shaped like crucifixes and have white wreaths on them. Every detail of this image holds some symbolic meaning that can be analysed.

The dark angel figure holds a green object. Green as a colour has strong associations with luck, envy, nature, death and rebirth. In this case it is safe to assume that the green object is symbolic of death as the title of the painting is *The Death of the Grave Digger*.

The two figures are stood below a willow tree which is significant because the willow tree is linked to death. The willow symbolises Persephone, the Greek Goddess of the Underworld and also shares links with Native American death culture.

A less obvious symbol that covers more of the image than any other is the snow that carpets the graveyard and graves. Snow is a cold protecting veil that falls during winter when all the plants have died and animals are sleeping. It's deeply symbolic of the circle of life and nature. The last detail I want to highlight are the wreaths in the background of the painting, the wreath is a well established symbol of death and rebirth. It was used by the Romans at funerals and still is used by western societies today.



Carlos Schwabe

Le Mort Du Fossoyeur

The Ambassadors

The symbolism in *Le Mort du Fossoyeur* is a different kind to that which was used in *The Ambassadors* by Hans Holbein the Younger. Holbein uses lots of objects with more obvious symbolic meanings, but Schwabe makes the entire image a symbol. For example where Schwabe has used lots of symbols all representing death, decay and the after life Holbein has created a single image filled with many different types of symbolic image.



Hans Holbein the Younger

The Ambassadors

In the centre of the image stands a large table with two tiers, both covered in objects. The top of the table has tools used for nautical navigation and a globe. These items are highly important, they show the two men to be well travelled, rich and also intelligent. Other signs are littered throughout the painting. The lower shelf has several open books on it, another symbol of intelligence, there is also a lute with a broken string, this links to the Calvinists and is a symbol of discord with the Catholic Church.

The last two symbols are perhaps the most important of all, even though they are the best hidden. In the upper left corner of the painting, partially obscured by a curtain, we can see the image of Jesus Christ on the crucifix. This is clearly symbolic of respect towards Christianity. The last symbol is the anamorphic skull, stretched across the front of the image like a blot. The viewer has to look at the image from a very acute angle. It's hidden in plain view, a reminder that death is ever present.

Calvinism ^{l'kalvɪnɪz(ə)mɪ}

noun

the Protestant theological system of John Calvin and his successors, which develops Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone and emphasizes the grace of God and the doctrine of predestination.

Careless Art Costs Lives

Chapter Three

propaganda |prɒpə'gandə|

noun

1 chiefly derogatory information, esp. of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote or publicize a particular political cause or point of view : *he was charged with distributing enemy propaganda.*

• the dissemination of such information as a political strategy : *the party's leaders believed that a long period of education and propaganda would be necessary .*

ORIGIN Italian, from modern Latin *congregatio de propaganda fide* 'congregation for propagation of the faith' (see sense 2). Sense 1 dates from the early 20th cent.



Manuel Ocampo

Guided by Sausage

Propaganda in War

While I was looking at artists to compare with Carlos Schwabe I found the artist Manuel Ocampo, who creates fantastic illustrations in a similar style to the propaganda posters created by the allies in the World Wars. I think the early illustrators who created them have greatly influenced contemporary styles.

Ocampo's work is a sick evolution of the propaganda poster, I feel he has looked closely at the wars of the last century and seen their horrors. One of his pieces of work titled "The World is Full of Objects, More or Less Interesting" contains an image of the quote from which the title is taken "The World is Full of Objects, More or Less Interesting; I Do Not Wish to Add Any More" It means that the work of art, or execution isn't as important as the ideas and thought behind them.

However as a creator of Art I think that Ocampo feels this is more true of the world at large, than just his artistic endeavours. His piece The World is Full of Objects, More or Less Interesting is itself full of things that are more or less interesting.

The work is laid out in a very traditional grid with the subject occupying the centre of the frame and the title sitting at the top. The object I described as the subject is a large fleshy mound that represents the earth, its surface is scared and covered with stuff. At the base a hairy male leg extends from the flesh, as well as this there is a tooth and several vaginas. Towards the top a sword is stabbed deep into the object, next to it a syringe is also lodged in the flesh along with several nails. Lower down the sword has erupted from the object's side. The object also contains a television, wine bottle, some cigars, a used condom and a copy of the New Yorker. The floor is dirty with what looks like the thick brown putrefaction of life. I think all these things are related to the exploitation of the world at the hands of man, it's been stabbed, raped, exploited and left to die.

Manuel Ocampo

The world is full of objects more or less interesting



THE WORLD IS FULL OF OBJECTS, MORE OR LESS INTERESTING; I DO NOT WISH TO ADD ANY MORE.

D. HOEPLER



izes, hammocks, 2 hubble-bubbles, porn magazine, wig, installation view, Galerie Michael Neff, Frankfurt am Main, 1998. **World of Objects More or Less Interesting**, 1998, acrylic and on canvas, 154 x 122 cm

à créer une géographie directe à l'aide de la peinture : un fenêtré ouverte sur un espace imaginaire, mais un

ig, environment."

Rodchenko Knew

The topic of propaganda made me think about Alexander Rodchenko, the defining designer of propaganda posters for Russia during the period after the Great War when Lenin came to power. His work has been an undeniable influence over the world of graphic design since the 1920s. Some of his work is so prominent that its influence has lasted nearly 80 years after being used as an album cover for a western pop band.

This is a brilliant example of how an iconic image has influenced a contemporary illustration, an almost direct copy of the original. Rodchenko's style of work has lasted and influenced countless artists and illustrators for nearly 100 years.



Franz Ferdinand -
You Could Have It So Much Better

In Conclusion

Conclusion

What I've learnt today

At the beginning of my study I started to look at cave art, and I have come to realise that as humans there is an innate need for art. I hadn't really considered the practical applications of art, just its visual ones, but I quickly realised that cave art links deeply to modern iconography. There are a few million years of human development that have gone into the buttons on that TV remote control. While icons are directly linked to what they control or represent, symbols are often more cryptic. Carlos Schwabe for example in his *Le Mort du Fossoyeur*, the gravedigger has been surrounded by subtle symbols. The willow tree for example, or the green glowing object in the Angel of Death's hands are all symbolic of death. But neither as obvious as the symbols of knowledge used by Hans Holbein the Younger in his painting of the Ambassadors. Books, scientific tools for navigation and observation at sea and musical instruments. I've learnt that not all symbols have to be immediately apparent.

I studied propaganda artists in my third chapter. I looked specifically at Alexander Rodchenko, a Russian artist who started to practice just after the first World War. His influence spread across the century affecting everything. Bands like Franz Ferdinand were influenced by him, in particular one album cover was based on an illustration of Lilya Brik. Not only did Eastern European propaganda have an effect on modern artists and illustrators but so did that of the British and Americans. I also looked at the artist Manuel Ocampo, I feel his work is influenced by western propaganda, and political cartoons. His work is often gruesome and is clearly very politically charged. Both styles of art are full of symbolism, the strong shapes and hard lines hark back to the early constructivists in the USSR, suggesting both strength and solidarity. While the Anglo-American propaganda has a focus on the family and children with warmer colours and softer lines.

Symbolic images have played a huge role in illustration since we first made images, being recycled and evolving and mutating as time passes. I am sure that this process will continue into the future.

Joe's Personal Study File Edit Format View Window Help

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My personal study

The End... ⌘Q