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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 means 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. In chapter four I will study a contemporary illustrator who also uses symbolism in his work. I will study Dan Hillier an illustrator who I talked to in Brick Lane Market where I also saw his work in October this year. His work is full of symbols in the form of human and animal skeletons, tentacles, ornate patterns and Victorian attire.

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

How Have Symbolic Images Influenced Contemporary Illustration?



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.

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 delve into *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.

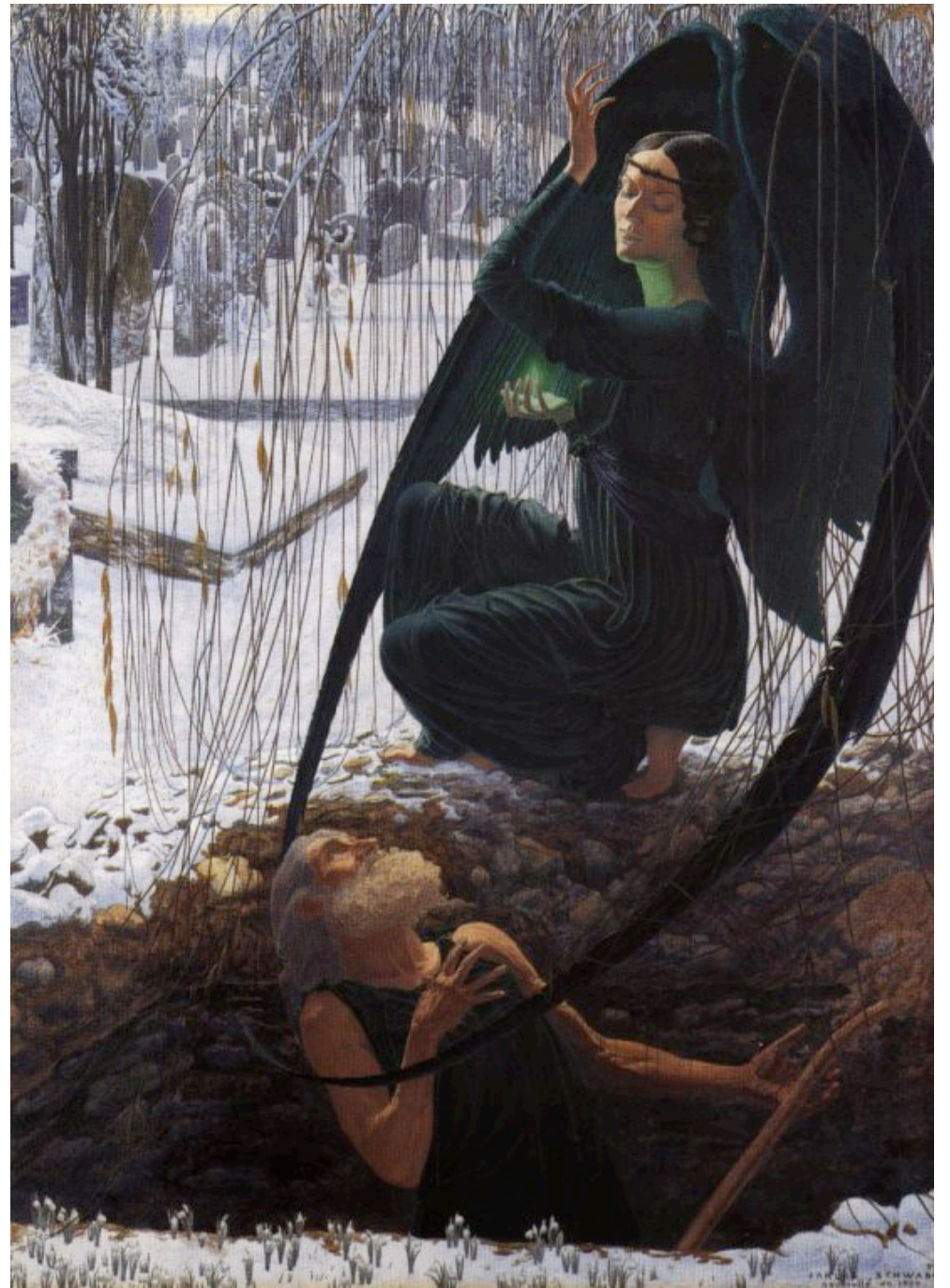
The dark angel figure holds a green object. Green as a colour has strong associations with luck, envy, nature, death and rebirth. In this case it is safe to assume that the green object is symbolic of death as the title of the painting is *The Death of the Grave Digger*.

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.

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.



4 – *Le Mort du Fossoyeur* translates as *The Death of the Gravedigger*

Careless Art Costs Lives

Chapter Three



Propaganda in War

While I was looking at artists to compare with Carlos Schwabe I stumbled across 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.



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.

Down the Pan

Chapter Four

Aesthetic Education

A piece of his work I really enjoy looking at is Aesthetic Education. The various elements that have been composed to make the face fit together so perfectly they appear as if they were always as one.

The image is composed of nine elements. A human chin, lips and nose, a pair of eagles heads, a pair of horns, a pair of wings, a lotus flower and decagram with lines radiating from it. An interesting quality of this image is that the eagles heads and the face they help form can't both be looked at at the same time.

The two eagles heads are positioned so their eyes fit with the bottom half of a face we can already see, the wings and the horns look like some kind of head dress with the lotus flower at the centre. The lotus is also deeply symbolic to many of the eastern religions.

The only thing that confuses me about the image is the decagram between the wings, as my research has turned up nothing it seems to have no meaning at all. Perhaps we're not supposed to be looking into it that much.

Stock Art

Proper illustration is losing out in favour of cheap stock photography, stolen images and clip art. Modern print and online media aren't given the care and attention that printed type was as little as 30 years ago. The problem is content creators have changed, and people don't want to pay an illustrator to adorn their work with beautiful imagery. I've tried to tackle this problem myself head on, I found an ugly article in a magazine and properly illustrated it and created a new grid for the type. The result was much more impressive than the original and significantly easier to read. The issue is however, that it's more profitable to turn things out quickly and poorly. This is a real shame because artists like Dan Hillier, who I met in London in October, don't get to show us their amazing work. I can feel a big fight coming on.

NewScientist vs The Daily Mail

In my home a wide variety of paper based journalism is consumed, however a large proportion of it is generally incomprehensible babble about celebrity or complaints that too much money is being given to asylum seekers. I personally avoid these types of publications in favour of ones discussing alternative power sources, exploring the universe and human progress. I apologize if this sounds pompous, but it's precisely the distinction I need to make between the two types of print. Well written and well illustrated or poorly written and unillustrated. The NewScientist comes at a price, £3.25 to be exact and when compared to a copy of the Mail, which costs just 50p it's very expensive.

Dan's work, like many others, is beautifully made and under utilised.

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 looked briefly at propaganda artists in my third chapter, specifically 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 looked at Alexander Ocampo in this chapter, I feel his work is influenced by western propaganda, and political cartoons. His work is often gruesome and is clearly very politically charged like so much art with similar inspiration. Both styles of art are full of symbolism, the strong shapes and hard lines of the Eastern European propaganda suggest strength and solidarity. While the Anglo-American propaganda has a focus on the family and children with warmer colours and softer lines.

There is however a serious threat to modern illustration, that comes in the form of ephemeral whim of media. The speed at which content is produced is so fast that no time can be given to illustrating the work. Despite this great shame, some publications are fighting back with quality imagery for some of their articles. An illustrator who I've spoken to called Daniel Hillier creates the kind of high quality imagery that is wasted due to a lack of demand. Carsonified, a web design agency from Bath in the UK have the right attitude, shown off in the form of their gorgeously illustrated website. They've taken extra time to make an outstanding experience for however visits their site, and it's paid off as this organisation is highly successful. I feel that I need to ask the questions. Does society feel that illustration is needed? Does it have a place anymore? I think the answer to both of these questions is yes and no. Some of the time people just want the bare text, so they can read it quickly and then bitch about it with their mates. On the other hand some people may want to sit down with their children and a beautifully illustrated book, to share in the experience that's been painstakingly prepared for them.

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.