

GALLERY STRATFORD

ART AT WORK: Commercial Art from the Collection of Ken Nutt

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“A Pair of Hands”

Since most illustrators work as freelancers, a phone call bringing new work is always welcome, but if the art director or editor dictates exactly what is needed down to the smallest detail, the standard judgment on the job is “all they wanted was pair of hands.” This kind of commission puts the illustrator in the position of a surrogate mother. None of his or her personality is desired, just a happy, bouncing printable product.

Technically this is called ‘rendering’ and, in the days when cameras were cumbersome and photography not very adaptable, rendering was a huge part of the illustration market. Entire catalogues, most product ads, textbooks and science journals were illustrated with hand-drawn renderings.

In spite of the necessity that the product drawing look exactly like the item the customer was about to order, or the gall bladder in the medical text really look like a gall bladder, some renderers used the bit of creative leeway available to them to make some very fine works.

John James Audubon’s *Birds of North America* is a shining example of this. Of the drawings in this section, the artist’s decision to float the Cube house on a sea of white paper makes a virtue of its simplicity and in the rendering of the ornate sideboard, the incisiveness of the pencil drawing suggests that the piece itself is of high quality.

Before Halftone Reproduction

By the eighteen-sixties, the demand for illustrations was at an all time high, but there was no automatic means by which a drawing or painting could be turned into a reproducible image. When Harper’s *Illustrated Weekly* sent the young Winslow Homer to cover the American Civil War, the sketches he could make at lightning speed had to be engraved by hand on the end grain of type-high blocks before they could be printed in the newspaper. These blocks were often cut into sections and worked on by separate engravers before being reassembled on the press, the joints and engravers’ varying styles being clearly visible in the printed illustration. The illustrations in *The London Illustrated News* (in the large case) were printed by the same method.

There were other means for reproducing illustrations: etching, steel engraving, mezzotint and lithography, but all were hand processes and most were even more labour intensive, so

wood engraving remained the reproduction method of choice until late in the nineteenth century. At the end of the century a method was developed to transfer and engrave line art onto a metal plate photographically. For the first time an artist's work, in line at least, could be reproduced without the intervention of an engraver and at any size. Illustrators began to work larger, using the process of photographic reduction to 'tighten up' the work. The direct reproduction of tonal art however was not possible until halftone screening became commercially viable.

With halftone screening, the artwork to be reproduced is photographed through a screen that breaks up the tones of the image into a field of dots. The dot form of the image is transferred photographically to a plate and then etched. A middle grey printed in this manner is actually made of black dots covering half of the area of the white paper. When the viewer stands back from the image, the dots blend and a middle grey is seen. Colour printing is a quadruple repetition of this process using magenta, cyan, yellow and black inks. The quality of printed screened images improved in the new century and, although screens are now created digitally, it is still the most common method of reproduction.

The elimination of the engraver was a great leap forward in the speed of production of images and paved the way for the proliferation of painterly illustration. With any advance in technology there are losses as well as gains. Screened offset lithography can never capture the density of colour or crispness of line of older techniques. In many ways the quality of reproduction in older magazines and posters was closer to that of a fine art print than it would ever be again.

Changing Markets

As the herald of all that is new in style and technology the art of the marketplace is essentially an art of the moment. Styles come and go at least seasonally and so do venues. Gone are cigar labels, cigarette cards, hand painted lobby posters for the movies and that glorious square foot of space, the long playing vinyl record cover.

Still with us are the poster and editorial illustration, and new markets open up all the time: Gaming design, web design, graphic novels, the parallel universes of Juxtapoz magazine, Manga and Kawaii (Hello Kitty and the Japanese cult of cuteness.)

Thirty years ago, animation seemed almost dead, now it is an active market for legions of commercial artists. With the increased sophistication of computer generated imagery, the aesthetics of non-animated movies have moved closer to those of animated film. Storyboarding and concept art have increased in importance now that anything that can be drawn can be realized on the screen.

So illustration is thriving; any free-fall through the web will turn up images of astounding quality. The only reason for anxiety is the difficulty in archiving a world gone digital in any

permanent way. If someone ever pulls the plug, the record of an era in our culture, of which commercial art is a vital part, will disappear.

Changing Markets: Murals

During the golden age of illustration, it was not unusual for illustrators to take on mural projects. Perhaps this crossover was because illustrators often had the skills needed to create narrative compositions that fine artists of the time no longer possessed. In mid-career Dean Cornwell went to England and studied with the muralist Frank Brangwyn before undertaking an extensive five year mural painting project for the Los Angeles Public Library. This and many of the other murals by artists of the golden age are still in their original locations. Maxfield Parrish's 'Old King Cole' is the centrepiece of the bar at the St. Regis Hotel in New York City; Norman Rockwell's mural of Yankee Doodle still hangs above the bar of the Yankee Doodle Taproom in Princeton, New Jersey, although it is now behind glass and insured for six million dollars.

In the depths of the great depression of the nineteen-thirties, both commercial and fine artist were hard hit by the lack of economic activity. Amazingly some parts of Franklin D. Roosevelt's recovery plan directly addressed the plight of all artists. Through agencies like the Works Progress Administration and the Treasury Department Section of Painting and Sculpture the government created five thousand jobs for artists. Two hundred and twenty-five thousand works of public art were produced. Among the most highly visible were murals painted for post offices and other government buildings across the United States. In the production of this volume of art for public consumption, artists evolved a clear-cut, accessible look that later became known as the 'WPA' style.

These murals by Harold Ashodian are of a later date and painted for a private company, a bank in Providence, Road Island, but the use of murals to enliven the blank spaces of Modernist architecture and the sombre colours and simplified forms are an echo of the WPA period.

Changing Markets: The Magazine

The production of magazines began in an era when movies were in black and white, when the radio could bring stars into your living-room but not show them to you and television was non-existent. The magazine was king. From the teens until the nineteen sixties, the illustrator of magazines played a major role in the shaping of popular culture. John LaGatta showed women what to wear and J.C. Leyendecker showed the men. When they were not at the drawing table, many illustrators lived the life they pictured. Leyendecker built a mansion in New Rochelle. A uniformed chauffeur drove him to his studio in New York City. Illustrators created a host of fictional characters that magazine readers followed as if they were real. Leyendecker's Arrow Collar Man received hundreds of proposals of marriage by mail. He was

preceded in this pantheon of fictional characters by the Gibson Girl and James Montgomery Flagg's Uncle Sam and followed by Haddon Sundblom's Coke-swiggling Santa and a whole town full of Norman Rockwell's loveable middle Americans. Movie stars eager to join this fictional firmament vied to pose for the most famous illustrators, more trustworthy than any photographer at making them look good.

If the eighteen-nineties was the golden age of the illustrated book, the nineteen-thirties, forties and fifties was the golden age of the picture magazine. Titles proliferated; competition was fierce. These were women's magazines, men's magazines, Boy Scout magazines, church magazines, magazines that could only be sold under the counter. In all of them, illustration was a prime component. One critic of the day expressed the fear that, in illustrated magazines "writers were only space fillers"

A couple of developments that came early in the publishing of magazines opened opportunities for women in the field of illustration. The first was a change in the way illustrations were bought. Initially, magazines, like newspapers, kept illustrators on staff in an art department and paid for art supplies and the overhead of the studio, but when it proved more economical and gave the publisher more flexibility, to buy from freelancers, artists found themselves working from home. The environment of in-house art departments, often nicknamed 'bull pens', could be as sexist as any, and the ability to work from home was a great advantage for an artist with young children. An at-home studio made it possible for a young mother to pursue an interesting professional career. The trend toward specialization that gave rise to titles like the Ladies' Home Journal and Good Housekeeping was also helpful to women illustrators. Artists who were adept at painting cowboys and python attacks might not be much good at portraying home life and the world of children, so these assignments were often given to women illustrators.

Changing Markets: The Paperback

Although the paperback format for books originated in the nineteen-thirties, sales of small, cheap editions of already published novels did not take off until the advent of World War II. In the restrictions of wartime, a low-cost book that could fit in a pocket or purse became a welcome way to pass time between shift work or while travelling as part of the war effort. After the war the affordability of the paperback and a more mobile population let it reach out to new markets from rotating racks at supermarkets and airport news stands. While hardcover books are usually sold in bookstores to a readership that is aware of the author and the book through reviews or word of mouth, a paperback is more likely to rely on its cover to get the casual shopper to buy on impulse. Unfettered by any need for respectability, paperback covers have gone through waves of garish invention in form — foil stamping, embossing, 3D images — as well as content — bodice-ripping erotics, heart-thumping gore or both. Soon it became easier for certain kinds of writers to break into the market in pocket book format than go the usual route of starting in hardcover and reprinting in soft.

An interesting special case in pocketbook design was the Dell Mapback. Whereas the rule of thumb with pocketbooks was to pick the most lurid scene in the story and give it to the reader on the cover with as little as possible left to the imagination, Dell Mapbacks, mostly in the mystery genre, opted for a sophisticated, symbolic front cover that gave away only the tone of the novel. On the back of the book was a map to help the reader follow the locales in the story. (There is a flipped over mapback in the large showcase.)

It was the compactness and portability of the paperback that made it a mass market success. What happens in the next couple of years will decide whether the compactness and portability of the 3,000 book e-tablet will spell the end to the lurid but dazzling pocketbook cover.

Looking Backward

These three drawings were created for the British American Banknote Company, a Canadian company founded in the year before Confederation for the engraving and printing of banknotes, stamps and stock certificates. The drawings are the original from which engravers would have created steel plates for the production, in this case, of stock certificates.

Steel engraving, invented in the eighteenth century involved scoring a hard steel surface with countless grooves that would later be rubbed with ink and printed to create an image. Steel engraving was used to make large scale black and white replicas of famous paintings for the Victorian print market. The longevity of the plate and the special skills needed to create it also made it ideal for items that needed to be difficult to counterfeit.

These particular images look to have been drawn some time in the middle of the twentieth century, long after steel engraving had been superseded by other methods of reproduction, even for the purpose of foiling counterfeiters. But in areas where it is important to inspire confidence, (perhaps where none is warranted, like the stock market) the use of a retrograde technology can give an air of stability and prestige.

The imagery of the drawings is also backward-looking, harkening back to the use of heroic figures to embody abstract ideals. Unfortunately, when the source of the imagery is so remote from the consciousness of the public and even the artist drawing the image, the gap is filled by Hollywood stereotypes giving rise, as it does here, to one of the charms of popular art when it fails to attain lofty intentions, the joy of kitsch.

Roughs

In his sculptures, Michelangelo would assert that he had only released figures that were already existing inside the stone. He did not, he maintained, know what or who they were

until they had emerged. The surrealists and Abstract Expressionist took a similar tack in the creation of art, painting from their dreams or in a trance.

Because commercial art involves clients, texts, merchandise, editors and art directors, it is important early in the art-making process to know exactly where the artwork is heading. An assignment usually proceeds from thumbnail to rough and, after consultation and approval, on to colour study if needed, and then to camera-ready art.

If there is any dreaming to be done, it is done at the stage of the rough, before the client and the art director have weighed in with external concerns. This is what makes illustrator's roughs so fascinating. You can see the artist working; the tentative first thoughts, subsequent revisions, have not been polished away.

Two of the roughs here are by a couple of the best illustrators of the golden age of magazine illustration, Robert Fawcett and Dean Cornwell. Cornwell's is the more focused production, probably because he is working out the compositional details on an advertising commission. Very likely this is a study for a mural project for General Motors.

The Fawcett is even more intriguing because in his rough we can see him casting around, freely arranging a stock of personal images in search for the form of what may even be a personal project. In the small case are examples of his most celebrated series of illustrations. They are to accompany a set of new Sherlock Holmes stories co-written by the son of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and John Dickson Carr, a well known mystery writer of the day.

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