

GALLERY STRATFORD

ART AT WORK: Commercial Art from the Collection of Ken Nutt
April 17 – June 5, 2011



Gwen Fremlin, illustration for the December issue of American Magazine, gouache on illustration board.

“But is it Art?”

What do we mean when we ask that question? Art is a little word with a lot of big meanings, all as slippery as a prize trout. That is why we can speak of the Art of French cooking and the Art of Fly Fishing as well as the art of the con.

We can try to narrow the field by acknowledging that when the question of the artfulness of a piece of art comes up, we are usually speaking of the Visual Arts and not the dance or cooking, but we are not much farther ahead. If the question is posed while standing in front of a painting by say Robert Bateman, the Canadian nature painter, or Norman Rockwell, and there is an art critic within earshot

the answer might well be a definitive, “No. That is not Art. That is illustration.” Indeed I have heard these very words from two different art critics agreeing on the quality of Mr. Bateman’s work.

What the critics meant by the statement, other than that the painting was not very good, is harder to figure out. Bateman, regularly derided as an illustrator, has never illustrated anything. He, throughout his career, has sold his work, not to a commercial client, but through an art gallery. Norman Rockwell, on the other hand, is generally celebrated, even on occasion by an art critic, as an illustrator, and rightly so, as he illustrated hundreds of books and magazines throughout his long life, but his work has also been hung on the walls of major American art museums, like the Guggenheim in New York City. So is it Art? Other possible distinctions between Art and illustration — distinctions of narrative content, polish of technique, sentimentalism — are no more helpful. They all allow for so many counterexamples from the other camp as to beg the question. Yet the judgment, “That is not Art. That is illustration.” persists.

The division between fine and commercial art was not present at the beginning of Western tradition. Art-making in the Middle Ages was a mostly anonymous activity and undifferentiated from other forms of labour. The fourteenth century brought a storytelling genius and an artist with a name, Giotto. He was followed in the fifteenth century by Leonardo de Vinci, then Michelangelo. Out of the appreciation of greatness of these individuals came the concept of the artist as someone special, almost divine, and of art as a thing finer than day-to-day life, an expression of an ideal world. The artist was toiling at a calling higher than making a good table or chair: Fine Art.

But what this Early Modern Period did not give us was any division within the world of art production. It was also the time of the birth of modern capitalism and Michelangelo and Leonardo were commercial artists. They painted to the dictated specifications of their clients and got paid, or tried to. Both Botticelli and Titian illustrated books; Albrecht Dürer hawked his Bible illustrations from a portfolio as he worked his way to Italy. A century later, Rembrandt van Rijn was etching his own Bible scenes in a way that brought the text to life for the common man and in the process developed a language of visual storytelling that has influenced narrative illustration from his day to our own. Yet none of these artists were evicted from the House of Fine Art.

The split came from a multitude of factors working in tandem — all part of the giant societal shift brought on by the Industrial Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. The middle class grew in size and wealth; more of the working class learned how to read. Printing got cheaper; therefore more books got printed and read. Soon the demand for things to read outstripped the supply of existing texts, and novels were serialized in magazine format as they were being written. People as usual wanted pictures to accompany stories, now no longer exclusively Biblical. Artists adapted to provide illustrations for the new literature of entertainment. All this was happening against a background of a decline in patronage by the church and state. Soon more artists were working for printers than for the aristocracy. Because the artists involved were professionally trained, the new art was not folk art, but popular art; and because, like their Renaissance forefathers, they were paid, it was a commercial art. In North America, the artificiality of the division in the continuum of art-making was heightened because the middle class and the literate working class were vast in number and the aristocracy was non-existent.

However with the emergence of the robber barons of the second half of the nineteenth century, the idea of a separate Fine Art was maintained and, perhaps because of cultural insecurities of the

nouveau riche, even enhanced. Citadels of fine art, like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston were built with the largesse of the new millionaires. Their assigned task was to show art that was to lead the people, to educate the people, not to show the art of the people. No illustrators were welcome.

Even if illustrators were not wanted in the art museums, by the early twentieth century the position of the commercial artist, abetted by advances in colour printing, was straightforward and remunerative – tell a story, sell a dream, give the people what they want. It was the role of the fine artist that had become ambiguous and out of this anxiety grew Modernism. The now-established millionaires bought old paintings to give to their museums. The public bought magazines, posters and calendars, so fine artists were reduced to romantically starving or seeking the patronage of adventurous, if scarce, young millionaires. From this situation came the assumption that, if an illustrator was an artist of talent and chose to stay in the commercial art field, he or she had sold out, afraid to tough it out in the avant-garde. This explains the defensiveness shown by so many of the illustrators of the golden age in interviews about their craft.

By the nineteen-sixties, the dominance of photography in advertising, magazine illustration and reportage brought an end to most of the lucrative markets for the commercial illustrator. In one of those back-flips of which a world of fine art dominated by the avant-garde is capable, the most commercial of commercial art was suddenly interesting to fine artists. Now Pop was Art, if you were hip enough to get the joke. The soup can and comic-art panel, the design on a box of Brillo pads were finally welcomed into the art gallery. However these new artists, like Andy Warhol, an ex-illustrator, brought with them enough of the hucksterism of the commercial world that the artists who had drawn the original comic, painted the original Brillo box, got no fame and no money from the advance in respectability made by their creations.

Today, in our Post-Pop and almost post-print world, with international fine artist like Takashi Murakami and Jeff Koons continuing to dive deep into the muddy wellsprings of mass culture for both inspiration and a wider market share, and current comic-book artists/graphic novelists like Seth and Chris Ware maintaining an artistic purity as rarified as anything in the hall of academe, perhaps it is time to leave behind the question “Is it Art?” and accept all that is out there to be seen, accomplished or not, as part of our Visual Culture.

That would leave us free to reserve the word ‘artist’ for all those who surprise and delight us, whether they be French cooks, fly fishermen – or illustrators.

Ken Nutt
Collector

ART AT WORK accompanies the ILLUSTRIOUS exhibition, featuring the works of contemporary illustrators Jack Dylan and Peter Ryan.

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