

The Conclusion

In the 19th century, during the first golden age of illustration, thousands of images appeared in books and periodicals. These ephemeral images amused, entertained, informed, agitated and educated the public. Critics and artists argued that much of this work was poorly reproduced, derivative and prosaic.

The same criticism has often been applied to contemporary illustration and graphic design over the course of the new digital revolution. However, this debate on the value of high and low art is irrelevant when looking at some of the wonderful examples of illustration being produced in a wide range of contexts all over the world. Witty, humorous, intelligent and original illustration continues to directly affect people's lives and behaviour.

During the 1980s many people in the graphic design community and some illustrators embraced computer technology. It was felt that the Apple Macintosh, which was launched in 1984, would replace all other tools and means of production. Computers have offered illustrators greater control, speed and endless ways to manipulate and construct images. However, because of this, those that commission illustration have demanded instant artwork and deadlines have become shorter and shorter.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, some critics felt that traditional hand-crafted illustration was overused and was failing to visually represent the spirit of the time. Advertising agencies, design and publishing companies looked more towards photography and digital montages created by graphic designers. The fact that designers had been quicker to make use of digital technology, along with the rise in stock illustration and transition from traditional print to new media, led to a feeling that commercial illustration as an adjunct of graphic design was irrelevant.

However, the computer, new software and the internet have also been instrumental in the resurgence of illustration and a widening of its role. During the 1990s a saturation of digital effects, including cool, clean, modernist and so-called deconstructed typography, and flat vector graphic line drawings scanned from photographs dominated every facet of our visual culture.

As technology invades all aspects of our lives, corporations have looked for the human touch, the personal and the handmade to visually represent their products and brands. The celebration of computer trickery has diminished and there is now a reappraisal of illustration and

craft. As in graphic design, a new critical discourse has taken place in illustration, with an inclusive approach that accepts the importance of the work of those operating in the margins of illustration, art and design. A new generation of computer-literate and versatile illustrators has reinvigorated the discipline, integrating old and new media, self-publishing and extending illustration beyond its traditional publishing heartland. Areas such as graphic novels, fashion, comics, the music industry, street and club art, children's books, magazines and animation have led the way in this resurgence.

The illustrator's role is still the elucidating of text (often generated by others) and the telling of stories in imaginative ways, however, there is also a long tradition of the illustrator as author (both writing and illustrating text). An integral part of illustration remains collaboration, traditionally with the design community and art directors, but also increasingly with the contemporary fine art gallery world and publishers. The illustrator remains a freelance commercial artist, choosing where and to whom to communicate to based on individual ethics and values.

The education of a professional illustrator begins in art college; it is in this environment that divisions and specialisms are introduced. Illustration is often seen as occupying an area (or corridor) between fine art and design and is usually considered as a pathway within the sphere of visual communication. The demand for illustration courses remains high; the subject's new inclusive and interdisciplinary approach proving very attractive.

Courses offer fundamental skills in image-making with traditional media and also embrace everything that new technology has to offer. Illustration students exploit every opportunity and resource across art and design areas including printmaking, computing, life drawing, photography, typography to moving image etc. With the blurring of disciplinary boundaries, students from all areas of art and design are attracted to fundamental aspects of the illustrative process, such as narrative, engaging with content and telling personal stories. It is within this postmodern complex and hybrid environment that illustrators are asserting themselves.

The huge rise in new media and inventions supported by the continuing expansion of the internet is opening up opportunities for illustrators to engage with visual content in new ways and in global markets. Illustrators are still working in collaboration with creative directors in advertising agencies, design consultancies and with the publishing industry where demand is high. They are also

establishing their own companies, agencies and cooperatives, contributing to visual culture in official and unofficial contexts.

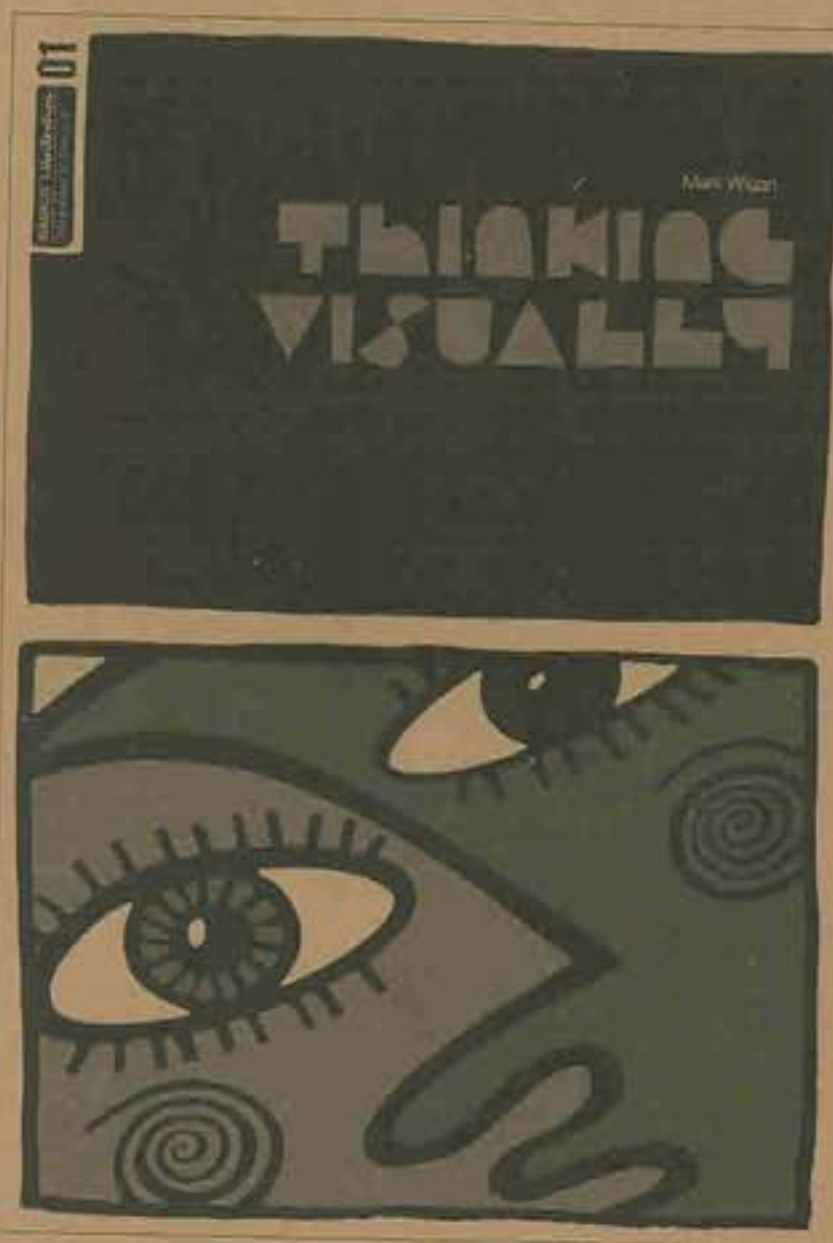
Growing numbers of illustrators are becoming authors of their own products, which they design, manufacture, market and distribute on the internet. The versatility of the contemporary illustrator can be seen in the wide range of contexts in which they are working and the types of products and artefacts they are illustrating.

Illustration appears in advertising campaigns, fashion design, editorial, the music industry, graphic novels, comics, animation, science, medical and botanical publications, natural history, theatre set and costume design, design for TV and film, the internet and interactive media, stamps, computer games, collectible figurines, theme parks, mosaics, community arts murals, storyboards, children's books, nightclub interior design, printmaking, surface pattern, educational books and animation, licensed character illustration, gift wrapping paper, stationery, cards, posters, ceramics, clothing labels, jigsaw puzzles, calendars, maps, diagrams, charts, caricatures, textiles, toy design, phone cards, tattoos, point of sale, live painting performances, company reports, corporate brochures, food packaging, billboards and many more manifestations.

Illustrators are also moving into graphic design, designing typography, art directing magazines, directing music videos, television commercials and making films. They sometimes become artists' agents, gallery curators and art buyers for publishing. Many enter education and become professional teachers and lecturers, or work in the community arts field.

With the blurring of traditional discipline boundaries, illustrators are also positioning themselves within the contemporary fine art world gaining gallery representation all over the world.

Throughout history, illustrators have been valued by the world as mavericks; in contemporary jargon they have often thought and lived outside the box. Many of our iconic images have been created by illustrators who have commerted with political passion, humour and satire, educated, instructed, decorated and entertained. The enduring respect for the skill and craft of the handmade mark combined with personal vision, originality and ideas has not diminished. The global market is rapidly changing and illustration, one of the world's most popular forms of art, is constantly evolving. There has never been a better time than now to become an illustrator.



Cover image

Thinking Visually cover image by Mark Wigan from *Wig Out* 2003