Designer Research Paper: Susan Kare

Fenix Frias

New York City College of Technology

In the '80s technology was taking the world by storm. The possibilities of this new technology were something that was never seen before. It seemed almost impossible that computers were something that could translate into a household item. It wasn't normal for regular citizens to be able to use something as powerful as a computer at that time without being some kind of software genius. But it became plausible. The only thing that was missing was making the interface friendly for the aforementioned "regular citizens". Companies like Apple that were the pioneers of this new pace of life, knew that there needed to be something that would help make their computer interface less scary to the public eye. This is where Susan Kare comes into the equation.
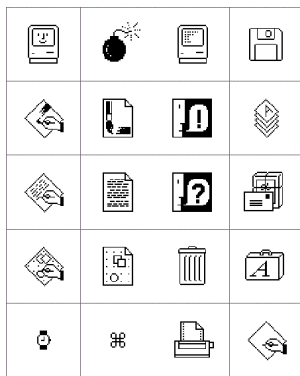
Born in 1954, Ithaca, New York, Susan Kare was truly a creative genius in her time. She attended Mount Holyoke College and in 1975 earned her Bachelor of Honors, summa cum laude, in Arts. 3 years later she was awarded the Doctor of Philosophy from NYU. She then relocated to San Francisco and did a stint at MoMA. She showed great promise as a designer. In the early '80s, she received a call from her high school friend Andy Hertzfeld, who was a software engineer and a part of the original Apple Macintosh development team. She was then recruited by Apple to the Macintosh design team to design user interface graphics and fonts. Despite her not having much computer knowledge, they knew that her creative mind would thrive on bitmapped images. They were correct! Her icon designs were not only useful and intuitive, but they also had a playful, whimsical quality. She made this complicated concept of the Mac more inviting and less fearful to the public.

On top of her designing icons, she was also responsible for creating new typefaces for the Macintosh. She started with the bold operating system font, called Elefont, and decided that it

would look cleaner if " the lines were only ever horizontal, vertical, or at 45-degree angles". It

was executed successfully and was not only the system typeface of the Macintosh but also the

iPod for over 20 years. She would then produce more fonts for the Macintosh. At first, her idea

was to name these new fonts after the train stops from her and

Hertzfeld's old neighborhood (Overbrook, Merion, Ardmore,

Rosemont, and Paoli). Steve Jobs loved the approach but felt that

naming them after "world-class cities" would be more fitting (New

York, Geneva, London, Toronto, and Venice). Susan also started to experiment with typeface

with an "Avant-Garde" approach. This would start with San Fransisco or Ransom, where the

characters looked like cut-outs of newspaper articles from the note of a kidnapper, and Cairo

where it consisted of modern hieroglyphics. The Cairo font was also one of the earliest examples

of emojis where the user could embed small pictures to portray meaning in their text.

Apple also had a brand new application in the
works called MacPaint. This would allow the user to
create designs and drawings using the bitmap
capabilities of the Macintosh. Apple put Kare to the task
of showing off the true power of this application. She
created several MacPaint drawings for the user manuals and promotional advertisements,

including a Japanese woman combing her hair, a pair of tennis shoes, and gourmet baby food.

Kare's career doesn't finish at Apple though. She went from working as the creative

director at Apple to working as the creative director at NeXT Inc before it was bought by Apple.

While at NeXT, she worked with big clients like Microsoft and IBM. Microsoft sought her help

with designing the card deck for Windows 3.0's solitaire game project. They also wanted her

expertise in designing icons. A lot of the icons that she designed for

them remained unchanged until the release of Windows XP in 2001.

This included the Notepad and other control panel icons. Even

Facebook recognized her work and acquired her help with designing

their "Gift" icon. In 1989 she would then go on to create her own

digital design firm, Susan Kare LLP. In July 2015, it was announced

that she would be joining Pinterest as their product design lead and is now appointed as creative

director of the company. Her most recent project has been the design of a new cafe in the San

Fransisco Pinterest HQ. It is called "The Point". Her simplistic design model is spread all over

the cafe. From the mugs to even the menu typeface.
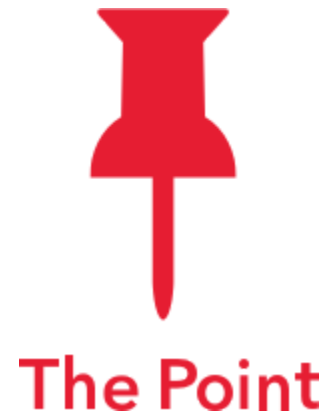
Susan Kare's work has been very life-changing. She was able to not only create some of

the most iconic "icons" but she was also able to communicate the complicated process that was

early technology and paved a path for the interpretation of technical information. She understood

that some processes are better explained through images and illustrations. Her creativity was

unprecedented at that time. Even with the most simple of illustrations, an idea can be expressed.

Technological communication and interface design would be nothing without her influence.

Through her knowledge of creating icons, she was able to not only climb up the ranks of these

companies but also inspire the next generation of graphic designers. To many, the idea of

something being simple seems to basic, but it is through simplicity that you gain the most

comprehensibility. You can even see it in modern times. Minimalistic is the aesthetic that a lot of

companies try to achieve. Having a universal understanding of a brand, especially in

technological field, is what these companies hope to have.

Resources

Canales, Katie. "Inside A Cafe In San Francisco's Pinterest HQ Designed By The Creator Of The

Iconic 1980S Macintosh Icons". *Business Insider*, 2021,

[https://www.businessinsider.com/susan-kare-pinterest-point-cafe-design-interview-photos](https://www.businessinsider.com/susan-kare-pinterest-point-cafe-design-interview-photos-2018-4)

[-2018-4](https://www.businessinsider.com/susan-kare-pinterest-point-cafe-design-interview-photos-2018-4).

Hintz, Eric. "Susan Kare, Iconic Designer". *Lemelson Center For The Study Of Invention And*

Innovation, 2018, https://invention.si.edu/susan-kare-iconic-designer.

"Susan Kare | Biography, Designs And Facts". *Famous Graphic Designers*, 2021,

https://www.famousgraphicdesigners.org/susan-kare.

"The Most Famous Graphic Designers Of All Time". *Canva.Com*, 2021,

https://www.canva.com/learn/famous-graphic-designers/.