



CHAPTER TWO

Style

Style defines an artist's place in time. It distinguishes old from new, fashionable from timeless, even genuine from fake. Much of an artist's career rests on possessing a recognizable style, even if that artist assumes (or steals) someone else's. Throughout the modern age, illustrators have, with impunity, tried on other illustrators' styles as though a hat or coat. This kind of ready-to-wear style becomes theirs until the next trend emerges and they try on another. And so it goes in art and commerce.

Style is also a form of currency. For a successful artist it can be money in the bank while for a bankrupt one it is merely counterfeit. So beware of false prophets selling fake styles and beware of taking on a style that produces no profit. Style is a critical concern for an illustrator at any stage in his or her career. What it says about an artist's point of view and how it frames an illustrator's ideas can mean triumph or failure—it can mean an illustrator has a voice or is mute.

However, style must not be viewed as the be-all or end-all but rather a function of art, not the reason for it.

So, how does an illustrator choose his style? Sometimes style is purposely selected from what Tom Wolfe has called "the big closet" of historical or contemporary cultural references, both high and low. Other times style selects the artist and by some twist of fate or preordained destiny it becomes the natural fit for whomever wears it. But most times it is a decision on the illustrator's part to find a distinct method of expression that also carries with it the value of allure. In the commercial sense of the word, style is a hook that sells a product, which in this case is illustration. So as a pure business decision, style is decided upon in the same way that a merchant might choose a sign—by what will best attract the attention of the proverbial passersby.

Most "fine" artists recoil from the commercial label and most illustrators (who are already professionally labeled "commercial artists") attempt to reconcile the A and C words. But both have to address issues of style. For illustrators, balance is accomplished through styles that signal a

particular approach that is not entirely mainstream—but not too off the track either. If a style is too outrageous it will not only bypass convention, it will thwart any hope of being saleable. Conversely, if the style is too neutral it will not stand out, and therefore be less sought after by art buyers. Balance is critical. Knowing how to present an honest persona and still appeal to art directors, editors, and spectators is the challenge faced by all illustrators.

Another challenge is to avoid being obsessed with style. As important as it is, style-compulsion has deleterious effects. Many illustrators (indeed some very talented ones) are pure stylists and less interested in concept than form. These artists excel in rendering pastiche or realism—their hand is a finely tuned machine. They are also the same artists on whom art directors impose their own ideas and in return get an impeccable but often soulless rendering in their particular style. While this is a venerable practice, it can nonetheless be limiting. The style of the moment, whatever it may be—new wave, old wave, art brut, realism, romanticism—has a proscribed shelf-life before going stale or turning rotten. So the danger for an illustrator in relying entirely on style as his whole equity is that when it falls from popularity (and it will) the paying work will doubtless dry up too. Conversely, if the style is a vessel for concepts, the longevity of the art and artist increases, at least insofar as style and concept are honest, intelligent, and viable.

Which leads to the question: What is an honest, intelligent, and viable style? To be honest means to select a form of stylistic address that fits the user snugly. In other words, the illustrator should not affect a style that does not merit the work itself. It is imprudent to work in a style that does not reflect the intelligence (or skill and talent) of the artist. To be intelligent means selecting (or evolving into) a form that best expresses the artist's acuity. Sometimes a comic approach is the best way to communicate serious messages. A satiric caricaturist will use exaggeration and distortion to present ideas, but sometimes he will use a very realistic style that forces a double take and underscores the irony. This is an example of intelligently knowing when and how to use one's graphic and comic strengths. But sometimes an illustrator may go overboard on the cartoon style, which undermines the idea. So intelligence returns to balance, and balance means exactly knowing when to apply the stylistic tropes that are best for maximum impact. Finally, viability means that the art is publishable. If for an illustrator the style and concept are inappropriate for any reason, then it is not viable, pure and

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Reflection of a Personality

Style can be analytically discussed as a means to achieve specific illustrative ends. But it is also a reflection of the illustrator's persona that occurs because it is *meant* to happen, and must thus be addressed with a little more subjectivity (perhaps even mysticism). This does not imply that style picks the illustrator, as indicated above, but that over time the illustrator grows into an outward manifestation of an inner sensibility. Ralph Steadman's violently splotchy, linear style is not just an incredibly expressive way to vent his rage against cultural and political *bêtes noir*; it is an extension of himself, or, to put it concisely, it is his voice. When style is a voice it is not to be turned on and off capriciously. It is something that is endemic to the persona of the artist.

Like Steadman, Henrik Drescher's style *is* (literally) Henrik Drescher. Although his work takes various forms—drawing, collage, painting, sculpture, as well as editorial, children's book, animation—his style is a consistent reflection (indeed evocation) of himself. He could not be Drescher without that specific style. Moreover, anyone who copies his brutish approach is committing a disservice (maybe even a crime) because it is akin to stealing another's identity.

Which leads to the question of influence in the evolution of style. It is perfectly acceptable for an illustrator to be so influenced that her "interim" style reflects the style of the one who is influencing. But this cannot be sanctioned for an extended period. How many times have the styles of Brad Holland, Sue Coe, Seymour Chwast, Edward Sorel, and others been invoked by acolytes? Like copying plaster casts, this is a way students and neophytes learn the processes of leading artists and is acceptable to a certain pedagogical degree. But once an artist goes out into world with a portfolio of other artists' styles, alarms must blare and fingers must wag. A savvy art director knows the difference between the original and a fake, and the latter will suffer consequences. Of course, not all art directors are savvy, so a few unethical illustrators will sneak into a few good jobs, but the deceit will not last long. So as a word to the wise, learn from others but develop an original style before the time to enter the market.

Style is a measure of the artistic (and commercial) continuum. So, many illustrators embrace approaches that are current, and currency can be



redundant. Here the challenge is to distinguish oneself from the pack in ways that do not subvert the basic approach to creation. Many well-known illustrators, from time to time, purposely alter or change their styles to avoid redundancy. Even if they originated the style, it is more prudent to let the acolytes have it than compete in a draining creative battle. Style is not a forever thing. Vision is more important and it can be dressed in various styles over time.

An illustrator's value is determined by various intersecting virtues, drawing or painting ability, conceptual acuity, problem-solving expertise, as well as being courteous, kind, obedient, and thrifty (well, maybe not the latter). Style is but one part of this list. As important as it is, style cannot be held as more so than any of the others. Style is a function of who one is as an artist.

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Talking about Style

HELLER: How does an illustrator develop, maintain, and protect his or her style?

ARISMAN: Picasso said that style should be what other people call what you do. This is style in the purest sense of the word. Unfortunately, in the illustration business, style is a bankable word. Illustrators are given assignments based on their style. If you don't have a style that is consistent, art directors hesitate to assign work, not knowing what will come back as a finished piece. This, it seems to me, is understandable, but in too many cases illustrators affect a style rather than evolve a style.

Undergraduate illustration majors are hammered with this issue. "You must have a style" is rule number one in putting together a portfolio. Two things happen when you force a look or style in your work. First, experimentation stops. Self-editing begins. Formulas result. The second thing is that if you don't have a style you will begin to look for one outside yourself. You can find a style this way but it won't be your own. This brings up the complicated issue of influence versus plagiarism. Any artist who looks at other people's artwork will and should be influenced by it. If the influence is genuine it will be referenced in the work. Determining whether you are stealing or learning from another artist has raised heated debates and bedeviled conversations for thousands of years. Picasso's comment was "steal from everybody." And he did. Braque, African masks, and numerous other sources. But, in the end, Picasso did Picasso. He made the references his own.

To give a more personal example, in the late sixties I saw my first painting show of Francis Bacon at the Guggenheim Museum. The figuration that dominated the art world at that time was not emotional. It was a cross reference to popular culture. Pop artists like Warhol, Rosenquist, Wesselman, and others used the figure as an icon. Warhol's silk-screened heads of Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, and Elvis Presley passed through my brain and not my stomach. In my own work I was struggling with trying to reflect the emotions I was feeling at the time. The Francis Bacon show went right

through my nerve endings, not through my brain. I left the exhibition emotionally drained—and excited.

Most people are seen in categories and miss the subtle nuances. People that didn't like me said, "You are ripping off Francis Bacon." Others, more gently said, "You must like Bacon's work." I knew the impact of Bacon's painting was showing up in my work. As defensive as I was (no one likes to hear that their work is not original), I also knew that Bacon's work would pass through me and become less dominant if I just kept working. I would, in effect, incorporate it, which is what influence should do. That has happened over the years and hopefully what I am doing now is more of my own. This is what you were referring to in your opening questions, "Let's talk about style. You have one (maybe two.)"

In the illustration business, style is more immediate; little time is given to develop a style naturally. Successful illustrators are blatantly ripped off because their "style" makes money. Different styles are in fashion at different times. Brad Holland has, in the past, been ripped off more than any illustrator I can think of. There was also Cober, David Levine, and others who were ripped off but Holland had so many imitators in the nineties it was painful. These rip-offs were commissioned and appeared in print. I fault the art director here as much as the illustrator.

What do you do when you see a portfolio that in kind terms is "highly influenced" by another illustrator?

HELLER: "Highly influenced" is a polite way of stating a big problem. But the fact is there is a zeitgeist or prevalent style that many young illustrators follow. Whether it is the surrealist style or the art brut style or a realist style. For each of these categories there are exemplars representing them. Brad Holland is surrealist, Henrik Drescher is brut, and James McMullan epitomizes the realist sensibility yet has an impressionistic leaning. These are languages as well as styles. So it is not unusual for artists and illustrators to work with these dominant languages.

I've used illustrators who somewhat resemble Holland or Drescher or McMullan or any number of others, but I would not use them if they looked *exactly* like these artists. When I see someone's work, the worst thing I could say to myself is "this is like Holland." But this determination is subjective. What's influenced slightly to my eye may seem like a rip-off to another and vice versa. So I try to balance as well as I can. If I see too many

of Holland's or Drescher's immediately. But if I see a style that I want to break out, then I might use it.

However, there is a certain redundancy. I will not use a style even if they are otherwise good to have repetitive (and currently hip—what I see in a cartoon) because I see something that has to be done.

When you see a portfolio with their content, but not that matter, redundancy. ARISMAN: I usually look at the content. "Many people ask the class to raise their hand now defensive but a discussion takes place. My attempt is not to resist or recognize things that are wanting to hurt someone."

The whole idea of a collective voice of the class all that money for good that applicants use to make much easier and cheaper.

When I see a question "Am I working on an image?" My assumption is done. When the original example. Students (swirls, etc.) as a balance does not belong on the face. I suggest that be considered in combination and cut a small square surface of their work.

of Holland's or Drescher's mannerisms or ideas in a portfolio, I close it immediately. But if I see a spirit of another but an individual approach trying to break out, then I might go with it.

However, the other part of this story is my desire to avoid redundancy. I will not use three illustrators who work in a similar manner, even if they are otherwise totally original. It doesn't do them, or me, any good to have repetition of style. I also won't use someone who does the currently hip—what I call schizophrenic—style (a cross between art brut and cartoon) because I see it everywhere. Again, there is no percentage in using something that has too much currency.

When you critique your students I know you are more concerned with their content, but how do you address style that is too *au courant* or, for that matter, redundant?

ARISMAN: I usually start by raising the question of style before we get into the content. "Many people are going to say your work looks like..." I then ask the class to raise their hands in agreement or disagreement. The student is now defensive but a collective opinion is out in the open. An honest discussion takes place that relates to more than the singular example. The attempt is not to resolve it (a legitimate influence may be taking place) but to recognize things that often go unsaid by art directors or fellow students not wanting to hurt someone's feelings.

The whole point of being in a community of illustrators is to use the collective voice of the group to vocalize what we are looking at. Why else pay all that money for graduate school? If you can do it by yourself I recommend that applicants use the tuition money to rent a studio and get their MFA in much easier and cheaper ways.

When I see more concern for technique than content, I raise the question "Am I working very hard to get through your technique to see the image?" My assumption is that I see the image first; then I see how it was done. When the order reverses itself something is wrong. Texture is a prime example. Students find an overall texture (cracking, brushstrokes, running swirls, etc.) as a base of their illustration. They disregard that this texture does not belong on everything. The dog, the glass table, the rug, and mom's face. I suggest that texture is not style and that the surface of things should be considered in combination with each other. I then take a piece of white paper and cut a small square out of the center. By moving the square over the entire surface of their work I ask them to imagine that what they are seeing are

musical notes. If all the “notes” in the illustration are the same note, something is wrong.

HELLER: But a dominant style implies that all the lines will be the same; it's inevitable that this recurs. Is there any sincerity in following style?

ARISMAN: The current interest in art brut is understandable, if not always useful. Sincere images, driven by an untrained artist, have power. Much like African masks, the artists are not trying to make “art”; they are trying to make magic. In our current postmodern world of self-conscious image making, the “reference” pop culture in all media, the individual artistic voice is hard to come by. Images, including illustration, are overwhelmed by mass media. We have seen too much, we know too much, and we yearn for the power we see reflected in art brut. We are unfortunately too well trained and experienced and that “magic” has little to do with what most artists are trying to do. Taken on its most superficial level, the drawing or painting of art brut is taken as “style.” Mocking what appears to be honesty, artists have imitated the lack of drawing skills as being honest and contemporary. In short, drawing bad is seen as style. Sometimes this lack of drawing skills is true. Many artists can't draw anymore because drawing was not part of what they did. Now that drawing has reemerged, how to draw has become an issue. Bad drawing has become a style.

In the classroom this issue has to be addressed as a style issue. The student who can draw has to be confronted with why they are choosing not to. If this is style-driven it won't last. There is too much of it around. If it is a genuine impulse to ask questions about “why am I drawing this way?” it will become integrated into their vocabulary. Have you seen portfolios where the art brut and cartoon issues seem genuine?

HELLER: I've seen real honesty expressed through incompetent drawing. I say this without tongue in cheek, yet with considerable reservation. There are some people who cannot draw but make that deficiency into a positive thing. Sadly, this way of working has become a superficial style for many who are just mediocre and who use the surface of “bad drawing” to suggest cool and hip. Remember, art brut derives from truly psychotic people, not nice middle-class boys and girls who want to make some kind of creative statement.

Would you agree, then, that our advice should be, at this stage, to

forget art brut and return to the real art
another style-hack?

ARISMAN: I agree that style evolves naturally from drawing. Once established, the foundation of art brut, or whatever. I think that all “style” is a conscious goal. The surprise is that everyone wants one or not. At this point, an artist's collages, etc., are all connected. Everyone uses whatever medium he chooses. This is not an assignment to an illustrator who then tries to do a different style?

HELLER: It has not happened too often. I don't want to risk screwing up, which will do more harm than good. But this style shifting has happened more often. It's a problem sometimes because it throws off the balance. It's not adverse to artists experimenting with new techniques to advance so I can judge the work intelligently.

I agree with you that style is expressive. Indeed some styles subvert the traditional. If you were to give a class devoted to style, I would have each student produce work that included line drawings, painting, and collage. I would have a voice in all of them. Many students think of style as a same technique. It's not. Style is the underlying impulse to do, no matter what tool you have in your hands. Style is of the world, not by a technical procedure. Style will change. Then you will have a new, healthy, on-going process.

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ARISMAN: I agree that style evolves naturally from a solid foundation in drawing. Once established, the foundation can be explored—expressionism, art brut, or whatever. I think that all "styles" should be forgotten as a conscious goal. The surprise is that everyone has a style whether he or she wants one or not. At this point, an artist's line drawing, woodcuts, paintings, collages, etc., are all connected. Everyone recognizes the artist's work in whatever medium he chooses. This is not a formula, but rather an expression. That expression is the artist's style. Have you ever given a first-time assignment to an illustrator who then turned in a finished piece in a totally different style?

HELLER: It has not happened too often. Most beginning illustrators don't want to risk screwing up, which will doubtless hinder getting a second job. But this style shifting has happened more frequently with veterans. It is a problem sometimes because it throws one's expectation out of whack. I'm not adverse to artists experimenting with their style, but I'd like to know in advance so I can judge the work intelligently and without prejudice.

I agree with you that style is expression, but not all style is expressive. Indeed some styles subvert the message while others enhance it. If you were to give a class devoted to style, what would it entail?

ARISMAN: I would have each student put up at least ten examples of their work that included line drawings, painting, woodcuts, etc., and find the same voice in all of them. Many students think that style is the result of using the same technique. It's not. Style is the underlying handwriting of whatever you do, no matter what tool you have in your hand. Style is driven by your view of the world, not by a technical procedure. When your *head* changes, your style will change. Then you will have a new style to explore. This is a natural, healthy, on-going process.

What Is Style? A Checklist

Picasso. "Style is what you call what other people do."

Style Search. The problem with searching for a style is that you usually find one that belongs to someone else.

Style and Content. Style devoid of content is decoration. Pictorial decoration is a craft, not an art form. The object of decoration is to add something to make more attractive. To adorn or make ornament for. To put decorations on a printed page as illustration is much the same as decorating a room.

Individual Style. Style is a by-product of our limitations, interests, and abilities. Everyone has a style that is an outgrowth of continuous work. The connections between your drawing, painting, and image making get stronger with time. That recognizable link in your work is your style.

Style Influences. All artists are influenced by other artists. "Learn to steal from everybody," was Picasso's advice. Other influences should show up in your work. This is not stealing. As you absorb the influences the impact will be less apparent. Good advice would be to not accept the influences that are readily available but to find out what art influenced the artists who you most admire.

Style Success. Style is not something you search for in the supermarket of successful artists. If finding a style that will make money for you is your primary goal, you will not succeed. At best, you will be a copy of the original. That usually doesn't pay well.

Trend S

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Trend Spotter

Hip. What does it mean to be hip? It changes from year to year, maybe even day to day. Fashion dictates style and style underscores what it means to be hip. Illustration can be categorized as hip (or not hip, as the case may be). But in an attempt to define hip, let’s say that there are certain color combinations and drawing techniques that make an illustration seem up-to-the-minute. Over the past year or so, illustrations that resemble vintage fifties cartoons, like Gerald McBoingBoing, are hip, in part because animated cartoons for Comedy Central and Cartoon Network have reprised the style. Moreover, the era (short as it might have been) for more serious and satiric conceptual illustration has been replaced by less conceptual, sprightly and colorful gag-styles.

Narrative. The rise of graphic novels and comic strips in the nineties and decline of conceptual—metaphoric and symbolic—illustration has allowed for the return of representational narrative work. One might call this the “new realism” whereby storylines are presented through unambiguous drawings in essay (or short-story) forms.

Color. Every stylistic era is underscored by certain dominant colors. Soft pastels were popular during the late eighties and stark flat primaries were ubiquitous during the nineties. To generalize is dangerous, but scanning the pages of *American Illustration* annuals reveals an upswing in flat yet vibrant color that is easily created using Adobe Illustrator and other computer programs.

Black and White. Long a mainstay of illustration, black and white is on the decline as the ability to print unlimited full color has increased

in most outlets. The computer has also made it easy to transmit color with a level of quality that surpasses black-and-white reproduction. So for now, black and white, while usually the *sina qua non* of illustration is on the decline.

Motion. Thanks to the computer, QuickTime movies have become a popular form of making artwork kinetic. Illustrators should learn the technologies and engage in the software that are available to them.

Art Brut. Term coined by Dubuffet for graffiti and crude pictures by untrained people. Very much in vogue in illustration today. Style driven, much of it lacks the power of true outsider art.

Comic Book. Illustrations done with drawn black line are an emerging style. Flat color is added in the computer. Unlike the comic book, subject matter is not superhero-based. Good drawing is back!

Collage. Composition is made up of various materials—photographs, newspaper cuttings, etc. Not as popular as in the nineties. Many illustrators are painting more on top of the collaged image.

Surrealism. Belgian surrealist René Magritte had a major impact on the field of illustration during the seventies and eighties. Dream images (objects floating in air, etc.) are less popular today. Much of surrealism has been incorporated into conceptual illustration.

Conceptual Illustration. Very popular. Ideas and information based in the text are presented using visual metaphors.