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BA Illustration

Ways of Perceiving (ADDA4023/C)

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**How does illustration reflect
political climate?**

Since the beginning of art history, illustration has been a visual language for protest, expression of opinion and uprising. It is a nonviolent form of resistance, used to visualize issues and emotions and spark community-wide conversations. This is particularly relevant in the political sphere, as art has always been a catalyst for the oppressed to speak up against power using more than just words. Art in a broader sense is fundamentally human and deeply connected to our emotions and beliefs, and so it has naturally been the first pillar of revolt when it comes to social violence and injustice. We can look at these illustrations throughout history and accurately tell not only the political climate of the time, but also public opinion based on the subject matter and context.

The earliest examples of political illustration stem from the early nineteenth century when political caricature cartoons were popping up in newspapers and prints. Artists such as James Gillray and James Akin were some of the first to break through with caricature art depicting powerful political figures like Prime Ministers and Presidents, and sometimes even their employers.



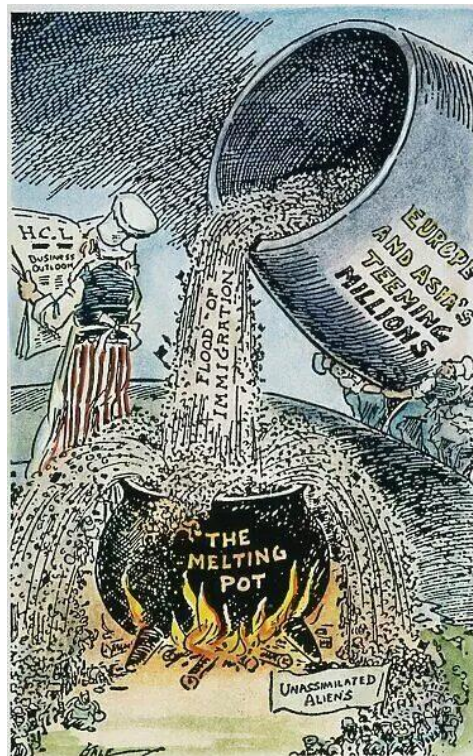
'The Plumb-pudding in danger', J. Gillray, 1805

This etching depicts Napoleon and British Prime Minister William Pitt slicing up a globe as if it were a pie, a symbolic representation for their greed for geographical power which is also reflected in the text detailing their 'insatiable appetites'. The comically large swords that they use to slice the globe as well as their oversized hats adorned with feathers are a visual way of making the men appear arrogant and greedy, turning a visual element into an easily readable metaphor. The illustration is packed with these subtle nods, such as the thinness of the men and the right-hand figure's struggle to reach the table; all of these intentional details designed to dig at these supposedly untouchable men and their weaknesses. Not only is this illustration a powerful analogy, but it is also an interesting look into how people of the time felt about their leaders which history described to be powerful and great.

We can tell from this illustration alone that there was a degree of political unrest at the time, and people were seeing these figures of power as pathetic and disagreeable rather than great and mighty. Published during the beginning years of the Napoleonic war, it seeks to satirize such figureheads and conflict and tells a story of disagreeability with leadership among the general public.

‘By the mid-19th century in America, newspapers regularly featured editorial cartoons to engage readers and influence public opinion.’ *Brief History of the Editorial Cartoon, M.C. Hopkins, Rochester Institute of Technology, 2019*

During the early years of print, people were susceptible to influence by visual imagery and print. Up until this point, events were solely documented by text and paintings, and so being able to print illustrations meant that a visual form of events was easily accessible, and so a culture quickly developed. It became easy to sway the opinions of viewers as an illustrator or print company - by making them see events through your perception in whatever way you liked - as there was no other source of information as tangible as a visual one.

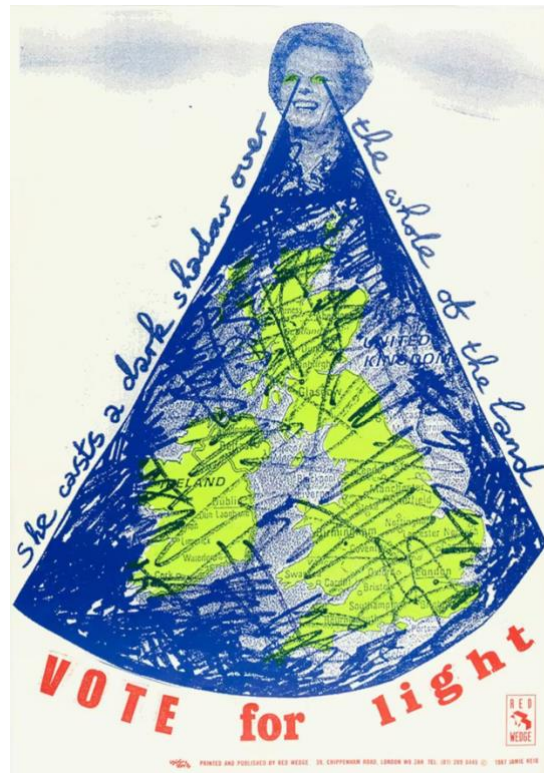


‘Spoiling the Broth’, E.W. Gale, 1920

This illustration can be approached in many ways – there is a number of elements present which represent different things contextually when put together. The purpose of this piece is to criticize the way in which the flood of immigration in the 1920s was handled by the US government; something that could’ve otherwise been beneficial if approached differently. The term ‘melting pot’ written on the cauldron was a term that was used to describe the US and all of the diverse immigrant cultures entering the States at the time, melting together into one unanimous group. We can also see Uncle Sam – the figure representing the US and its government – dressed in Chefs attire, turned away and distracted by a business newspaper. Largely focused on handling the fallout of the Great Depression, the influx of immigration was an afterthought for the US government.

This illustration was featured in *‘The Los Angeles Times’* which was at the time a primarily conservative newspaper. Due to the strong presence of racism among the American population - particularly in the south - illustrations such as this appeared in newspapers and magazines to stir emotion and rally people against immigrants. This bias was utilized to spread anti-immigration sentiment and served as a heavy voice of critique during the great migration of the 1920s, where European immigrants came to the states for job opportunities that Americans struggled to fill.

From looking at this illustration, we can clearly sense an anti-immigration sentiment as well as a present frustration at the US government and an incompetence which is visually portrayed. We can understand that people felt the States were becoming significantly overcrowded and underconditioned by the way the crowds of people are illustrated, as if they were a flood of liquid, labelled with the text 'unassimilated aliens'. Although free speech was exercised in the states at the time, this form of illustrative media in news outlets was an effective form of propaganda which was digestible, accessible and easily integrated into people's daily read. It also injected a sense of humor into these political issues, satirizing powerful figures and current events which was often relatable and attractive to people of the same opinion.



Vote for Light, J. Reid, 1987

Jamie Reid was a far-left artist and activist who fought the political status quo viciously through his art until his death in August 2023. He had vast social influence due to his contributions to pop culture, for example his album covers for British punk band the Sex Pistols. He eventually became an effective art director for the band, which was ultimately his gateway to fame, especially with the far-left punk music scene (*R Hudson-Miles, 2023*).

This poster was illustrated by Reid for the 'Red Wedge' movement, a group of UK musicians whose aim was to educate young people about Labor politics and rally them against Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's conservative government. It depicts the Prime Minister as an evil figurehead, casting a dark and ominous shadow over the country of Great Britain. This is handwritten on either side of the shadow - 'she casts a dark shadow over the whole of the land'. A far cry from previous examples of critical caricature, this illustration portrays Thatcher as a demon, completely attacking her as a darkness blanketed across all corners of the country. From this metaphor, we can tell that the country - or at least the Labor majority - was living through dark times, likely due to the poor leadership by the government. The fact that the Prime Minister is portrayed in such an evil manner rather than a satirized figure demonstrates to us that people were being harmed and affected by a government which did not serve them.

We can also observe that the shadow is blue in color, and the text underneath reading 'Vote for light' is written in red, representing the colors of the conservative and labor parties. The primary takeaway from this is that the country was led by a conservative body and the left wanted to regain control. This was also produced as part of a revolt movement rather than a news publication which demonstrates the population showing resistance against their government, as well as people utilizing the power of visual art over spoken word or text as this is one of the most powerful things they possess when not on the side of leadership.



War in Trump's World, B. Jennings, 2026

Caricature as a form of political illustration has seen its way through to modern day, with it arguably being used now more than ever. It has become a primary form of insult and extreme utilization of free speech, and we have seen it be used to satirize, demonize and also infantilize figures of power and authority. President Donald Trump has been a primary target for this form of illustration due to his largely disagreeable far right leadership, foreign policy and administration. This illustration depicts Trump saluting fallen US soldiers as he bears a Board of Peace badge, hides the infamous Epstein files in his blazer and wears bloodied school bags on his chest, representing children killed to gun violence in schools under his administration.

The news today is saturated with conflict - both geographical and financial. Day to day, we hear of US citizens being falsely imprisoned under racial pretenses while names that appear alongside human rights violations in the Epstein files will never see the inside of a prison cell. All over social media, these issues that fall under Donald Trump are seen through metaphors in illustrative protest. It is evident that there is more than just uproar among not only US citizens but also the rest of the world who are affected by Trump through tariffs and violent military attacks. This caricature is just one of many which depict Trump as a childish, power-hungry dictator, and his administration will be viewed as history in coming years through these illustrations.

In conclusion, illustration has and always will be a way for people to portray history through the eyes of the oppressed and the less powerful. We are able to look back at illustrations through time and accurately predict the social climate based on the subject matter, metaphors and context clues present in these artworks.

Reference List

- *'The Plumb-pudding in danger', James Gillray, 1805*
- *'Spoiling the Broth', E.W. Gale, 1920*
- *Vote for Light, Jamie Reid, 1987*
- *The Conversation Magazine, R Hudson-Miles, August 2023*
- *War in Trump's World, Ben Jennings, March 2026*

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- *'Spoiling the Broth', E.W. Gale, 1920*
- *The Conversation Magazine, Richard Hudson-Miles, August 2023*

<https://theconversation.com/jamie-reid-the-defiant-punk-art-of-the-man-behind-the-sex-pistols-iconic-imagery-211541>

- *'The Plumb-pudding in danger', James Gillray, 1805*
- *Vote for Light, Jamie Reid, 1987*
- *War in Trump's World, Ben Jennings, March 2026*