

Question 3: "The distinction lies in the fact that fine art is the idea (brought to life) while an illustration is a depiction (or explanation) of an idea. Fine art is simply art for art's sake." (Apatoff 2011). Discuss the factors that typically determine whether an artwork is labelled fine art or illustration (giving examples), and the connotations of this labelling.

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“Although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing” (Berger, 1972, p.10) Illustration has been closely linked to the practice of both graphic design and fine art for many years, there are huge cross overs between them but more so between fine art and illustration. Personally, having always believed that to an extent, the line is blurred in some forms where they could be considered one or the other. Arguably their distinguishing factors lie in their form, uses, depiction, visibility, reproduction, and payment. It all comes down to our individual perspective of what an illustration is or looks like and how we value it. To begin with its important to note the definitions of both practices, illustration is defined as “to furnish (a book, magazine, etc.) with drawings, pictures, or other artwork intended for explanation, elucidation, or adornment.” (Dictionary.com, 2020) Whilst fine art is “a visual art considered to have been created primarily for aesthetic purposes and judged for its beauty and meaningfulness” (Dictionary.com, 2020) Fine art is a broad label that covers all art forms, from sculpture to oil painting, realism to abstraction and so its close connection to illustration is unavoidable.

Predominantly narrative, Illustration is storytelling through signs and symbols. But the line is blurred when fine art is depicting a scene or is sequential, this is where the role of semiotics plays a part, both inherently depict an idea or communicate in some way. Semiotics was founded by Ferdinand Saussure, a Swiss linguist who in the structuralist movement investigated the function of the sign, suggesting that it is divided into ‘signifier’ which is the material aspect and the ‘signified’ being the mental concept. (Cobley, 1996, p.2) American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce built upon this idea suggesting that the sign can be broken down again into an icon; relating to the signifier with

some resemblance, a symbol; where the sign relates to the signifier and an index; whereby the sign is a result of the signified. Both disciplines share the idea of depicting and communicating messages or ideas whether it be for commercial use or connoting a personal feeling.

Logically, a reader recognizes what signs actually depict and then goes on to decipher some sort of cultural, social or emotional meaning. In reality, however, identification of what signs depict – especially pictorial ones – happens so quickly that it is easy to forget that it has happened at all.

(Cobley and Jansz, 2010, p.50)



Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni (1508-1512) *The Sistine Chapel*

When we look at the work of Michelangelo and many other Renaissance artists at the time, they painted biblical scenes, essentially illustrating from the text, and imagining the people, places, and scenes into paintings. The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel was commissioned by Pope Julius II and took Michelangelo between 1508 to 1512 to complete. The ceiling is divided with nine central stories in the middle illustrating key scenes from Genesis, notably the most prized painting; *Creation of Adam*, whereby the creation of man is depicted with Adam on the left and God surrounded by angels are

connected by the touch of their fingers, connoting the start of life. They are surrounded by 12 seated sibyls and prophets, 8 spandrels and in the corners: 4 pendentives illustrating the salvation of the people of Israel. When we look back at work such as this, the great master artists were commissioned, and conjuring imagery taken from the written word. They were tasked with this to provide visual representation as well as for decorative purposes essentially taught the story of Christianity through imagery. “My definition is this: illustration is ‘applied imagery’, a ‘working art’ that visually communicates context to its audience. A ‘working art’ implies illustration does a job.” (Male, 2014, p.10)



Leonardo Da Vinci (1495-98) *The Last Supper* and *Mona Lisa* (1503-1517)

When we look at other artists work in this period such as Leonardo Da Vinci's *Last Supper* for instance we could use the same definition of illustration for this piece too. But compared to Da Vinci's other works of art, such as the *Mona Lisa*, a portrait where it does not connote a particular message or have any signs to decipher other than a painting of a woman, this would now be considered fine art and in Apatoff's words 'art for art's sake.' But at the time, this transition from painting from life and painting from text seemed unconsciously effortless and we could speculate

that this was all considered under an umbrella term of 'art'. That they would consider themselves neither fine artist nor illustrator.

A historical and contemporary overview of illustration will depict seemingly hundreds of styles. However, in broad terms, there are just two forms of imagery. All variations of visual language will be placed within one of these. Literal illustrations tend to represent pictorial truths... the second form of illustration can be described as conceptual. There we can have metaphorical applications to the subject or visual depictions of ideas or theories.

(Male, 2017, p. 62)



Francisco de Goya (1799) *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*

When we look at the work of Francisco de Goya, a frequent nobleman and royalist painter and essentially the precursor of expressionism, we find that he uses symbolism in his work which is not common in past portraits of this kind. Also depicting war scenes and fantasy in oil paints, his work turned darker after he suffered 2 illnesses. He blurs the line between fine art and illustration when

comparing his portraits to his etchings, 'Los Caprichos' a collection of etchings of which shocked and upset many of his usual clients. 240 of these etchings were printed for sale but only 27 sold. These blended the lines between reality and fantasy, carefully and realistically depicting scenes of witchcraft, symbolising animals like humans and scenes of horror.

Whereas today many people are perfectly happy to believe or accept that art can exist for art's sake, arguably, Goya believed that art should ultimately make a difference. He uses his position as ilustrado to lampoon, satirize and pillory various institutions, practices and commonly held beliefs.

(Maclean, 2006)

In *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* he captures himself, head in arms at his desk, presumably sleeping, animals haunt behind him whilst irrationality takes over. This here can be interpreted by the signs he has given in the posture of the figure and animals who are right behind him being well lit compared to those that are lurking further away in the shadows signifying his state of mind and the demons that haunt him. Without a narrative, Goya simply illustrated his inner turmoil, 'depicting an idea' by Apatoff's definition with the accompaniment of the title of the etching giving context but by the dictionary definition, this piece could also come under fine art. Stylistically, it looks like a modern illustration.

In short, the twin pillars of modern illustration are 1.) quality reproduction, and 2.) the ability to collect marginal payments from large numbers of viewers. These two developments created a robust opportunity for talented artists. They are the core of the economic model for illustration, and the only categorical difference between modern illustration and fine art.

(Apatoff, 2011)

Apatoff discussed in his critical blog post that the reproduction of images is key to the disciplines differences. Illustration is for the masses, to be shared and communicated and so this idea can change the way we think about prints historically. The early 'business model' (Apatoff, 2011) of illustration began with the invention of the printing press leading to artists selling their work for less but to more people and in Goya's case despite printing what is now considered quite a small number of prints from his etchings, further pushes his work into illustration territory, especially given the context of his work. However, looking at one-off artworks, it can be argued that you cannot define art by its reproduction when museums and galleries sell copies as postcards, posters or printed onto items of merchandise. It should also be considered that taking an art piece out of context, changes the power of the artwork, "the meaning of an image is changed according to what one sees immediately after it. Such authority as it retains, is distributed over the whole context in which it appears." (Berger, 1972, p. 29) Nonetheless in modern terms, the reproduction of modern illustration is key to success and most often accompanies some sort of context or written word, so the imagery does not become lost in its message.



James William Waterhouse (1888) *The Lady of Shalott*

The Pre Raphaelite-Brotherhood (PRB) are important concerning illustration's history, and the build-up to its differences to fine art and distinguishing itself. The PRB, in 1848 was created at the time of the industrial revolution, having been inspired by the truth depicting art style of the pre-Raphael period. Their work took on immense detail and realism, setting precedent for future hyper-realism, their paintings had a high quality of focus in all corners. Literature and poetry as well as religion were subjects of their work. The founders consisted of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holmes Hunt and most notably; John Everett Millais who has the most iconic PRB work in '*Ophelia*'. However, a predominantly Pre- Raphaelite piece that is equally beautiful is '*The Lady of Shalott*' by John William Waterhouse who illustrated the poem with the same name that had been written 50 years before the oil painting, by Alfred Tennyson. The painting alone could be a fine art piece, especially without knowledge of the origins of its name. But with the addition of the poem's lines, it gives the artwork context which in turn gives it a role as an illustration. *The Lady of Shalott* features a cursed woman in a boat, she was only allowed to see the world through the mirror and having one day seen the reflection of the knight Sir Lancelot, she could not help but look at him directly, this led to her demise down the river, leading to her death. The image is dark and eerie, with the woman dressed in white, a symbol of innocence looking pained down the river. The candles at the end of her boat are being blown out, a symbol of her approaching death. This period is a crucial time if ever there was a distinctive moment when illustration was created and defining this new way of working in a structured way.

"I think the question is a fake one, usually concerned more about social status than about the nature of art." (Apatoff, 2011) The argument here extends to the accessibility of artwork, which when it comes to fine art tends to be behind gallery doors. And whilst illustration can be too, it is much more versatile. It is shown in children's books, advertisement, packaging, and magazines, used to inform, communicate, and describe. Continuing with Apatoff's differentiation, "In my view, there is no inherent difference between art and illustration except the way in which payment to the artist is processed." (Apatoff, 2011) This is true to an extent. Fine art, usually a representation of the artist's

expressions, feelings or self-directed briefs sell for a high price, illustration is more often responding to a brief from a client, however, some illustrators create their own briefs to sell their art, for example, writing and illustrating their own picture books. Obtaining briefs can bring in a lower income than that of selling fine art pieces however the key difference between the two is the role of the client and the commission or brief that is set.



Norman Rockwell (1921) *Painting the Little House*

When it comes to realism the line between illustration and fine art gets very blurry. The only definitive difference seems to be the context it is given. Such as the *Lady of Shalott*, Norman Rockwell's *Painting the Little House* is a beautifully detailed piece of work with great depth through the contrast in shadow and light. The denoted image of a boy painting a little wooden house whilst his dog sits alongside him. The connoted message read by the boy sticking out his tongue and the position of his toe reflects his concentration on his paintwork. This illustration was commissioned for an advert with the jargon, "No matter what it costs, the fact remains that it always costs more not to paint than to paint. Rust and rot go on till you check them. The time to paint and varnish is NOW."

(Norman Rockwell Museum, 2020) Even without the context given to it, the image is still narrative at its core, with the placement of the figures, lighting, colours, and objects within the painting, it tells its own story. These signs and symbols from the artist can be read by the viewer to understand it in their own way. And this could be applied to realism in fine art pieces too.

“During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries illustration styles were more or less indistinguishable from academic or gallery art- representational, narrative, or symbolic.” (Heller, 2008, p.9) When looking back through history it has some clear markers where the illustration we know now, has stemmed from. There are differences in ways in which fine art and illustration are shown nowadays, artwork is so easily available over the internet, with fine art frequently shown in galleries and museums, whilst illustration is nearly everywhere we look.

The purpose of illustration is to serve society, particularly when there's a need to convey a message or to communicate in some way. All aspects of our daily lives, including the cultural infrastructure within which we live and operate, are touched by illustration.

(Male, 2014, p.6)

By today's standard, illustration is used to influence and persuade, tempting people what to buy and where to go. Its presence can be seen everywhere from billboards to maps, storybooks to advertising, and in a digital format that can now even be animated. Many artists dip into either discipline; the need for an online presence is more important nowadays for recognition and getting paid for your work. Whilst fine art stems more from the artist's personal thoughts or ideas, it is maintained that they are illustrating an idea. In conclusion, it all comes down to semiotics and communicating ideas, of which they both share, it is their context, reproduction, depiction, payment and uses that differentiates them. It is our own interpretation and value we hold that deciphers their distinguishing factors.

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