

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.

Student Number: 1902000

BA Course Title: Illustration

Word Count: 2502

Lecturer's Name: Gwenllian Beynon

We have debated the purpose of art and how to define its role in our everyday lives as a modern-day society for years, and have never (and probably will never) come to an agreeable solution amongst all to who it may concern. With Art being such an ambiguous term to begin with, allowing its role in our society to be just as ambiguous as it itself is, will not allow us ever to have a 'right' answer; "(art is) the moving finger that records the destiny of a civilisation" (Read, 2002). In this rather lofty statement, Read gives art dominion over our lives; he places the arts on a pedestal of a god like power. And just like the ideas of gods, goddesses and heavens, which is often widely speculated by contemporary society, suggests that art is one in the same with these themes. So, with this in mind, we can conclude that it is only now, in a society where scientific origin theories and individual religious and political beliefs are more encouraged than they once were, that the purpose of art has gained this ambiguity. When we look at a piece like *The Mask of Tutankhamun*, we know its practical role and purpose it served; It protected the corpse of the mummified emperor from unpleasant pests and helped the spirit of said emperor to reunite with said corpse



Kuan, F. (10th-11th century) *Travellers Among Mountains and Streams*. [Ink on silk] Available at: <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/sac-artappreciation/chapter/reading-neo-confucianism-and-fan-kuans-travelers-by-streams-and-mountains/>

(McDonald 2017)

One of the earlier examples of art without a religious or political influence was *Travellers Among Mountains and Streams* by Fan Kuan. As expected, this was ridiculed and labelled worthless to the western world (when it was first discovered) for serving no way to glorify its state or religion. Confucianism contradicted this with "If you learn to see beyond the surface of the paintings... (you will) find the truths of the philosophies of life" (Fang 2017). This appreciation for art without serving to glorify a state was again picked up by Victor Cousin who coined the term "Art for art's sake" (Bell-Villada 1983), potentially leading us to the conundrum which we now face: How can we now define art and its purpose without an obvious functional service? We will explore this through looking at the connotations of two seemingly opposite genres: fine art, and illustration.

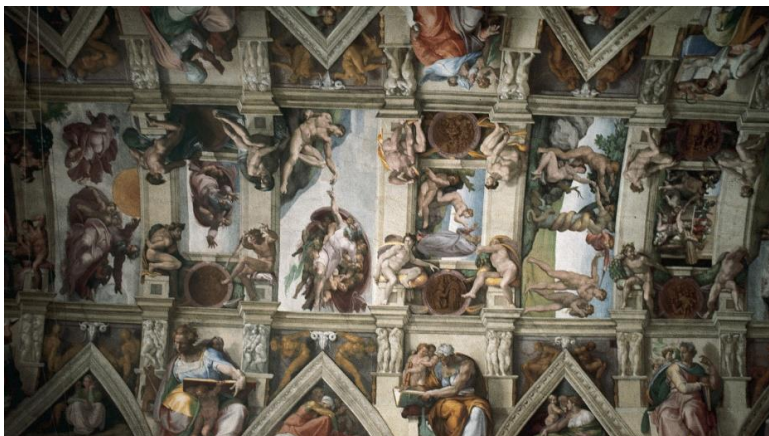
The statement that "there is no inherent difference between art and illustration except the way in which payment to the artist is processed" (Aptoff 2016) is an interesting one to consider. If we go back to the year 1450 when German inventor Johannes Gutenberg, after 10 years of experimentation and trial-and-error had perfected his revolutionary printing press, we could see with our own eyes how much of an impact this would have on the mass production of artists' works and how it would shape what we have come to understand as the illustrative medium. It would take

another 48 years for us to understand the true potential of Gutenberg's invention through the publication of



Dürer, A. (1498) *The Four Horsemen, from The Apocalypse* [Ink on paper] Available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/336215>

Apocalypse by Albrecht Dürer. This collection of woodcuts had “virtuosity, intellectual scope, and psychological depth (which) were unmatched by earlier printed work” (Wisse 2002) Most artists during the Renaissance period would’ve been making comfortable incomes from patrons commissioning works which were to be displayed in grand



Buonarroti, M. (1512) *The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel*. [Various] Available at: <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/sistine-chapel-ceiling-opens-to-public>

buildings. In the case of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, for example, Pope Julius II paid Michelangelo a hefty sum of 3000 ducats, approximately £60,000, (Valjak 2017) for the completion of the piece. However, in the case of Dürer, although no exact figure is known for how much he made, we know that he took full advantage of the rise of book accessibility (prices of books dropped by 80% (Bell 1936) thanks to Gutenberg) and supported himself comfortably off sales of *Apocalypse*, “hit(ting) the right nerve” (Meier 2014) of the European people. This does reinforce Aptoff's statement as Dürer was a fine artist, and was in contact with other fine artists of the renaissance period, most notably with Raphael as they exchanged works with one another (Duckworth 2017). This idea that the only

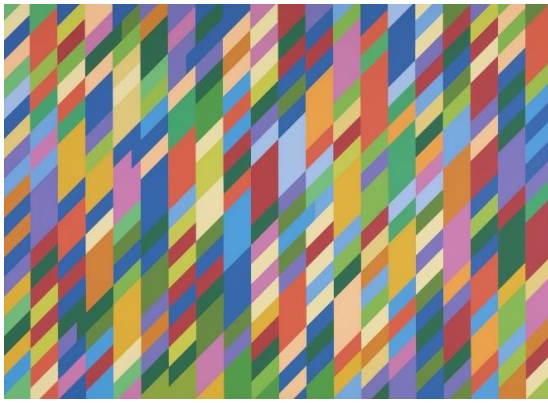
difference between these 2 art forms is the payment method is a flawed one though. Does this mean if a Botticelli is scanned and included in an artbook on the renaissance that it is now an illustration instead of a piece of fine art?

If we look past the idea of the only difference between the 2 art forms being the methods of payment, we can then try to find some other factors which label whether an artwork is considered fine art or illustration. In the case of fine art, it is generally accepted that it is usually a piece of work which has aesthetic value as well as existential value, and is to be considered carefully upon inspection. It is stated that “what came to be identified as the fine arts share a unique essence, in virtue of which they should be called “fine art”” (Clowney 2011). This suggests that it is not the technical skill or detail which determines whether art is “fine”, but its intention to follow this idea of creating work to suit the discipline of the craft. For example, A painting by Rosko, although only simple planes of colours, can immerse you into the work through the unique changes in colours from where they have mixed when a new shape was being added to the background, inviting you into an artificial world of “quiet contemplation” (MoMA 2010), which has more artistic integrity than a detailed and coloured but completely traced photograph of two swans on a



Rosko, M. (1958) *No.13* [Oil and acrylic with powdered pigments on canvas] Available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/484362>

lake created for a child’s school project. We can also see in Riley’s *Nataraja*, which could be considered a simple composition of vertical and diagonal lines blocked in colour, actually holds a deep significance to the artist captures the inner feelings and experiences of her trip to Egypt. Her new “Egyptian Palette” (Treves 2000) enabled her to celebrate the technicolour of the vegetation and fabrics of the Middle East. More subtly, the overt use of geometric shapes also conveys her appreciation for the Mediterranean (although she had been experimenting with these shapes in prior to her visit). The edges and cut of the shapes relate to the way sunlight can interact with them. This is best explained in an essay that explains in countries like Egypt, “where light and shade accentuated and... shadow produce sharp lines...the main tendency is towards a development of geometric design” (Robinson 1949).



Riley, B. (1993) *Nataraja* [Oil on canvas] Available at:
<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/riley-nataraja-t06859>

Another example which follows this principle can be seen by an installation created by Wolfgang Wielder in collaboration among fine artists, engineers and social scientists in an attempt to bring awareness to the topic of



Wielder, W. (2014) *Cone* [Aquadyne] Available at:
https://www.researchgate.net/figure/View-of-Cone-on-top-of-Dunston-Staiths-August-2014-Source-Authors_fig2_309595839

sustainability. The structure, 'Cone', was built on Dunston Staiths, a disused structure which suffered fire damage in 2003, disrupting the wildlife which resided there (Connelly et al. 2016). Although at face value it might've seemed crude and simple, it was created using Aquadyne, a 100% sustainable material made of plastics which would be otherwise sent to landfill; it embodies the "unique essence" Clowney refers to.

We can ask the same question about illustration. In this case, the genre is typically perceived as a visual representation of a concept with a real practical use. Educational use was one of the main purposes of Illustration up until the 19th century when the camera was invented, and even during the 19th and early 20th centuries, accurate illustrations were preferred over photographs as photography simply wasn't a match for illustration; images could

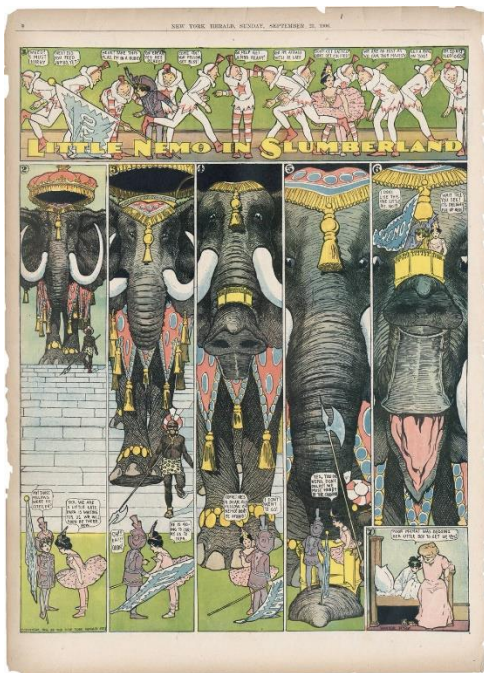
not be taken in colour and the detail which would be crucial to understanding the subject was lost in early photography, and were even considered lacklustre to some: “the results (of 19th century photography) were nothing to get excited about ” (Beard 2016).



Abbot, J. (1790) *Roan Duck*.
[watercolour and graphite on paper]
Available at:
<https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.197472.html>

Artists such as Edward Lear, William Swainson, and John Abbot were doing a much better job at providing visuals of exotic animals than that of the early models of cameras, and gave purpose to illustrative work. This also went hand in hand with ideas of presenting important social, political and economical using illustrative artworks in newspapers, satirical magazines, and advertisement. These early uses of illustration trapped it in a corner and could only be labelled as a means for providing adult information. There were of course fantastical and universal stories being illustrated during this time, such as John Tenniel’s illustrations for *Alice in Wonderland* and Winsor McCay’s series *Little Nemo in Slumberland*.

Looking at the intense richness of line and bold depth of the work created by these artists, we can see a clear link back to Dürer’s work. We established that Dürer could be considered a fine artist, so it should stand to reason that McCay and Tenniel should also be given the titles of fine artists. However, as their work was made for printing and narrative purposes, they remain labelled as illustrators despite having the potential to meet Clowney’s definition that was previously discussed. Their artwork, at the time, were considered as merely illustrations just made as supplementary narrative aid to the stories they were telling, but have since been more broadly thought of and in turn been considered fine art by some.



McCay, W. (1906) *Little Nemo in Slumberland* [Ink on paper] Available at: https://www.schirn.de/en/magazine/context/schirn_comic_winsor_mccay_little_nemo_in_slumberland/

A particularly interesting genre and timeframe to understand this idea of an art style's connotation changing over time is 19th century Japanese woodblock art. Print block illustration was considered to be a conventionally 'low' form of art in Japan during this time period. They were consumed by the Japanese people a similar way in which we consume social media feeds today, and "just as we consider a collection of celebrity Instagram photos as anything but high art, the people of that day wouldn't thought of their prints as anything special" (Bull, 2020). These representations of the society at the time would be displayed as either stand-alone prints or more ambitious sets of multiple prints, a good example of one of these sets being 53 Stations of the Tōkaidō, by Hiroshige. Despite the immense effort of creating 55 prints (2 additional prints were included for the beginning and end), and doing up to 30 variations(Bull 2017) of this set, Hiroshige was still not considered to be a fine artist the same way they would've considered painters and poets.



Hiroshige, U. (1833-34) 6 Totsuka: Motomachi Fork [Ink on paper] Available at: https://www.hiroshige.org.uk/Tokaido_Series/Tokaido_Great.htm

The wood block artist that changed and revolutionised how woodblock art was treated and perceived was Hokusai. Although his most famous and iconic print, *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* shows his skill to a certain degree and helped change the connotations of what print block art could be, his lesser known work, *Fuji from Edo Castle*. In the print, we have a close up of a shachihoko (eastern equivalent of a gargoyle) and Mt. Fuji in the background. Considering this piece was made in 1834, Hokusai would not have had access to a camera, which didn't arrive in Japan until 14 years later (Takeuchi 2008). To capture this close up of a shachihoko which was on the highest roof of the castle with Mt. Fuji also being in frame without any technological help, shows Hokusai's "stupendous creativity at a genius level" (Bull 2017) and the incredible level of skill these woodblock designers had. It's no wonder today we give artists like Hokusai the same level of respect as we do the more conventional painters and sculptures of the time.



Hokusai, K. (1835) *Fuji from Edo Castle* [Ink on paper] Available at: <https://mokuhankan.com/catalogue/0078.php>

When thinking in terms of how cartoons can be perceived by the general eye, we usually associate them as being illustrations made for children with their only purpose being to entertain. However, during the 19th century, cartoons were made exclusively for adults and highly rendered, as shown here with a cartoon commenting

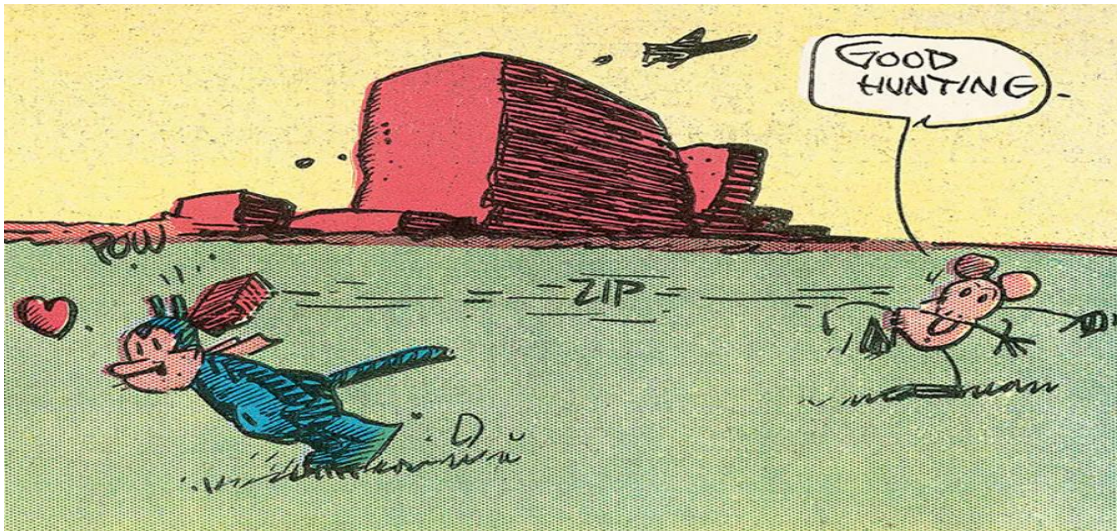


Punch Magazine (1858) *The Silent Highway Man* [lithograph] Available at: <https://www.meisterdrucke.uk/fine-art-prints/English-School/69677/The-Silent-Highway-Man-Your-MONEY-or-your-LIFE-cartoon-from-Punch-or-the-London-Charivari-10th-July-1858-.html>

on the pollution of the Thames in 1850s London. These cartoons were predominately sinical and gothic, usually depicting grim scenes that were making fun of the social and political situations of the times. The use of deep cross hatching and gloomy imagery clearly shows these were made to be enjoyed by adults and not children; it wasn't until the turn of the 20th century when we saw a drastic change in cartoon art which would eventually shape into our modern understanding of the genre.

One of the first artists to embrace a flat and simplistic cartoon style was George Herriman with his newspaper comic, *Krazy Kat*. Using the conventional cross hatch heavy style, *Krazy Kat* adopted a much more surrealist and otherworldly aesthetic. This change in cartoon art was happening hand in hand with portraiture in the form of cubism; "As comics and cubism stumbled through their early days at the beginning of the twentieth century, they played together in a sandbox of paradoxical visual temporalities" (Cooley 2019). We can see similarities in the relationship between Herriman and Picasso, a known fan of the *Krazy Kat* strip (Sabin 2002) and the relationship between Dürer and Raphael. In each case, the artists were a fan of each other's works despite one being considered

an illustrator and the other a fine artist.



Herriman, G. (1938) *Krazy Kat* [Ink on paper] Available at: <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/george-herrimans-krazy-kat-revisiting-an-abstruse-but-charming-comic-strip/>

This suggests that it might well be us as the consumers, viewers and critics who are creating these boundaries within the genres rather than the artists themselves.

We can see that through exploring the role and purpose of art within our society, can understand the connotations that different genres hold. In the past we saw how art was made only to serve people of power, but as technology and freedom of speech evolved, so did the meaning of art which in turn has made it inevitably abstract. Now looking back at artists like Michelangelo and others of the renaissance, with a more modern understanding, we could consider them the illustrators of their time. If we think back to when we mentioned Michelangelo's commissioned piece of work for the Sistine Chapel, we can make the argument that all commissioned work that tell stories belong to the illustrative genre; some artists have even argued over whether fine art can even be fine art if it isn't initially created by the artist, for the artist: "fine art is personal work created for the artist's satisfaction" (McCampbell 2017). This point gives a logical and satisfactory definition, and also reinforces Clowney's "unique essence" requirement (with the unique essence being that the artist is creating the work for themselves rather than for a commissioner). However, we can completely contradict this with the fact that works by artists like Hokusai are now conventionally considered fine art when they were originally commissioned woodblock prints made for casual consumption; the only real conclusion we can make between defining fine art and illustration is that both the genres are societal constructs that people have used to place value on certain works, and using it as a way to categorise works in galleries and archival books. There is no real defining factor that decides whether a piece is high or low art, whether it be content, monetary value, location etcetera, it is simply that we as a society feel the need to have a

sense of order and to make definitions for artworks, since the concept and role of art has become increasingly ambiguous throughout the centuries.

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