

Research in Context

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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.

Introduction

My essay is set to explore the connotations of labelling artworks as fine art or illustration and investigate the differences between the two classifications.

In this essay we will delve into the exploration of questions such as: Does the Sistine Chapel constitute art or should it be classified as illustrative as it visually narrates the biblical tale of creation? Is the Bayeux tapestry essentially one giant comic book, formatted as a tapestry (without questioning the fact that it has proved to be a monumentally influential historical record of the battle of Hastings)? Why is Grayson Perry is considered to be a fine artist when he constantly challenges the meaning of this term with the medium he uses?

Firstly, we must consider the distinction between what defines illustration is as well what constitutes fine art before we can begin to attempt to classify whether a piece is one or the other. So, what is illustration? Many believe illustration acts to fill in the gaps between words. Zeegen (2009) stipulates that illustration is the combination “personal expression with pictorial representation in order to convey complex ideas and messages” to create a direct form of communication. This strengthens the idea that illustration is seen as a method of pictorial story telling (reinforcing the old adage that ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’) and we can argue that many works that might be considered fine art could therefore be classified as illustrations. However, when many people think about the term illustration they can often consider it to be simply the art that is used in children’s picture books or graphic novels.

Patents, for example, contain images that depict an invention or process which are intended to support and clarify text and help to convey an idea or concept. There

would be virtually no question about defining these images as illustrations as their intent is so clear cut. In such cases a simple distinction between fine art and illustration would be readily accepted, but this level of clarity is uncommon.

In contrast to illustration, fine art is often described as being a piece of art that is aesthetically pleasing to look at, but the style and meaning behind it, if any, is more obscure and can range from an abstract expressionist piece to photorealism.

Jackson Pollock was an abstract expressionist artist whose "...art making was regarded as a direct expression of the artist's mind." (Dominiczak, 2016) but to the viewer the work can be vague and the meaning very subjective or even incomprehensible to many.



Photorealism is a painting style that emerged in the late 1960s where artists strive to create images that look photographic. Richard Estes is a photo realist painter who often attempted to recreate photographic images, often focusing on urban city landscapes and reflections. Although the work of photorealism is more objective as it is the artists desire is to accurately recreate a photograph, but other than that there

is no real meaning or story behind the works other than striving towards accurate reproductions of images from their original form.



The Sistine chapel

The Sistine chapel, painted by various artists including Michelangelo who famously painted the ceiling, is a series of religious artworks that cover the inside of a place of worship. “The central roof section of the Sistine Chapel consists of nine frescoes that tell the story of Genesis/ the Creation” (Campos and Oliveira 2016) because of this depiction of what is written in the bible it has been suggested that it could be considered as an illustrative piece.

The chapel is considered a supreme artistic achievement and attracts as many as five million people a year. It is commonly considered to be high Renaissance art due to the period it was created and the subject matter of nature, classical learning and

mankind. Many of the pieces depict man with realistic facial expressions and correct anatomical proportions depicted among natural backgrounds which does fit with similar established patterns of other Renaissance pieces. However, should the chapel be considered to be more illustrative in nature? Reasonably we can raise this question as the chapel is in essence pictorial representations of biblical stories which is fits the basic definition of illustration.

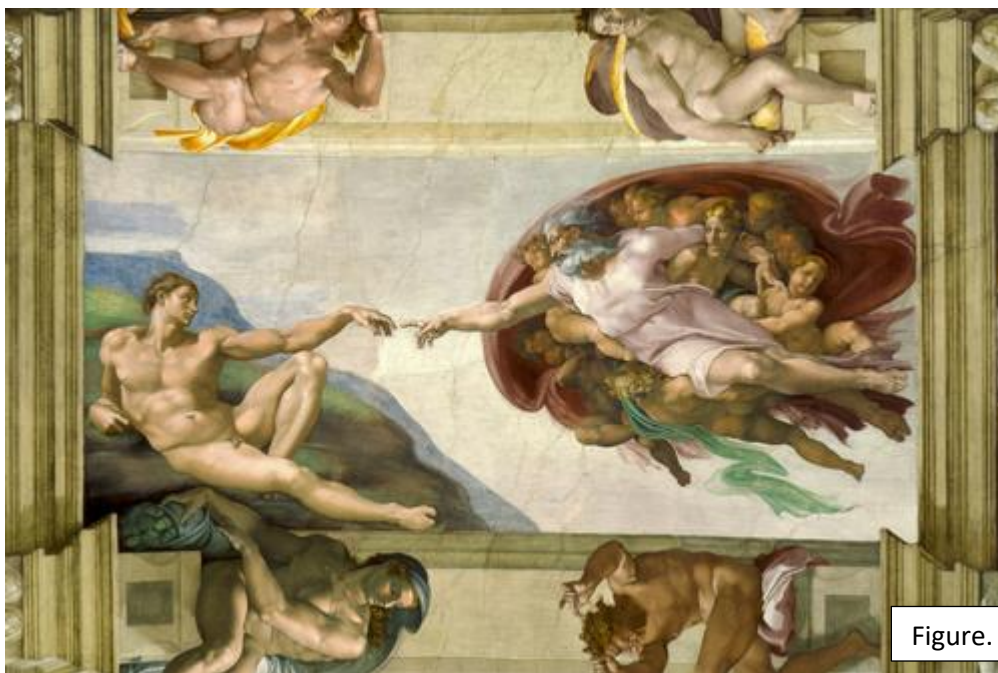


Figure. 3

One of the best known pieces in the chapel is Michelangelo's piece *The creation of Adam* which is considered to depict the transfer of energy from God (right) to Adam (left). This piece is the centre of many speculations with some critics suggesting that hidden meanings are incorporated within it, such as the idea of the outline of Adam forms the anatomical shape of a rib, and hidden codes lie within the piece suggested by the number of characters on the ceiling.

Illustrations are often commissioned pieces, and for the creation of the art inside the Sistine Chapel Michelangelo was commissioned by Pope Jullias II. Deivis de

Campos (2019) writes that it is thought that Michelangelo disagreed with many of the catholic traditions at the time which is thought to have led to the “often concealed subjects in his works that extolled other religious doctrines...”. Fine artworks are often created by the artist on matters in which they feel a deep personal association, an attempt to create aesthetic pieces that please themselves in a media they enjoy, not an attempt to instil appreciation or acceptance from others. As Michelangelo was known for working across different media (painter, sculptor and architect) and was often commissioned to create his work, it could be argued he many of his pieces were that of an illustrator.

A counter argument to this is that renaissance artists often strived to create perfection in their work, much like the work of photorealist artists whose work is considered fine art. Michelangelo’s sculptures were often highly rendered pieces depicting the human form done to a precise, extremely detailed and accurate standard. Many sculptures are considered to be fine art and Michelangelo’s representations are no different. Although often commissioned pieces, the sculptures are not created as a way to illustrate an idea, often ordered in an attempt to convey an image of wealth and power by the owner of the work.



Figure. 4

David is considered by many to be Michelangelo's finest sculpture, although it was originally commissioned as a series of prophet statues for the Florence Cathedral it instead was placed in the public square outside the Palazzo Vecchio. It depicts the biblical figure of *David* but does not allude to the story and is widely considered to be a commissioned piece of fine art. Often sculptures cannot be argued to be illustrative at all, instead being one of the most impressive pieces of fine art demonstrating great talent, craftsmanship, patience and dedication. However, it is worth the consideration that an architect's models could be viewed as illustrative a work as they are made to be functional and depict a vision to show the clients that which words would struggle to achieve.

The Bayeux tapestry

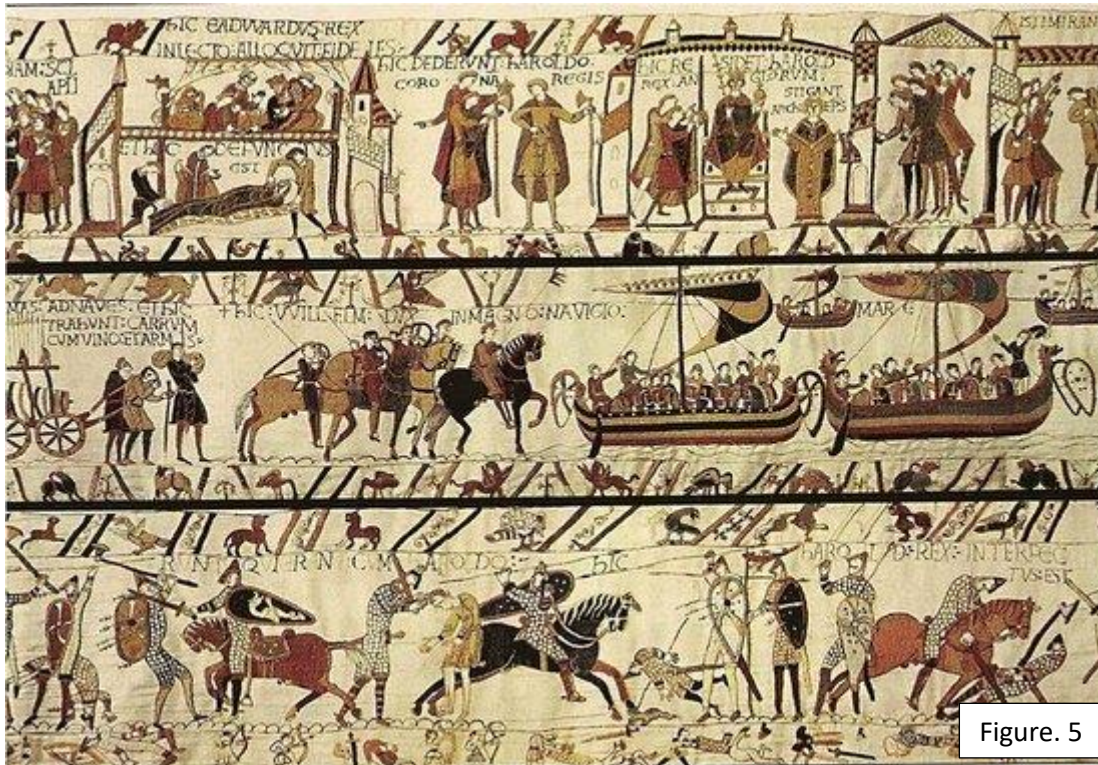


Figure. 5

Tapestries are one of the oldest forms of woven textiles and were often used as a way of showing wealth or creating art on a large scale. The Bayeux tapestry is a narrative piece of art part of which depicts the Battle of Hastings in 1066. It has been invaluable to historians in understanding events of the battle as well as minor details like the attire and the weapons used.

The Bayeux Tapestry is thought to have been commissioned for William the Conqueror's half brother Bishop Odo to portray the conquest of England by the Duke of Normandy. As it depicts the battle in a linear story, it can be argued that the tapestry may be deemed as a graphic novel using words to convey some meaning but mainly pictures to show the progression of a narrative. The tapestry begins by depicting the events leading to the Norman conquest including: battle preparation scenes, the army travelling on boats towards England and the climax of the battle

which include intricate details such as the death of king Harold. It is believed to have ended with the coronation of William as the king of England but this section is now lost.

Many books are formatted to have the basic narrative structure of an introduction, rising action, climax, falling action and a resolution. The tapestry also follows this same structure, therefore furthering the question should the tapestry be viewed as more of a historical book or comic strip rather than a piece of art?

Tanton writes that the tapestry is "...viewed as a type of chronicle." But then goes onto say that as some of the episodes exaggerate some events, this classification is much more complicated as its accuracy is questioned. It could rightly be considered to be more of a story that is loosely based on actual events, or a piece of propaganda commissioned by the conquering Normans, supporting the idea that it is an illustration, not a piece of fine art.

Grayson Perry

Grayson Perry is a British artist whose work covers of a wide variety of mediums including printmaking, ceramics and tapestries. Although often labelled as a fine artist, it can be argued that Perry's work is in fact better defined as being illustrative. Perry describes himself as neither a fine artist or an illustrator, and has stated that instead he identifies with the broader term 'artist.' However, on his TV show Grayson Perry: All Man, he states "as an artist its my job to notice things" (Grayson Perry: All Man episode 3 2016) which is why many of his work are interpreted as illustrative because of the stories he chooses to tell. His work is less about his own

emotional responses to certain events but more so bringing the focus of others toward these events.

Perry has said that a major influence on his work was experienced during his artistic studies at an exhibition called *Outsiders* shown in 1979 in the Hayward Gallery. This consisted of pieces by artists with no formal training and Perry specifically acknowledges the work of Henry Darger. Always being interested in work that breaks the traditional 'norms' Perry is known for refusing to conform to traditional artistic mediums as well intentionally challenging accepted social standards. When wearing female outfits and frocks, which he has said before he began doing around the age of eleven, Perry adopts the alter-ego of Claire which is a deliberate attempt to challenge societies accepted norms, the same intent lead to Perry's TV show '*Grayson Perry: All man*'.

When filming another television series for Channel 4 Perry created a series of six tapestries saying in an interview that he made the decision to use this artform as "I enjoy the idea of using this costly and ancient medium to show the commonplace dramas of modern British life." (Perry, 2016)



Figure. 6

Tim is a character depicted by Perry who appears in all 6 of the tapestries. *'The Vanity of Small Differences'* follows the journey of Tim through varying periods in his life and social classes. Beginning with *'The Adoration of the Cage Fighters'* (Figure. 6) which depicts the character of Tim as a baby in his mother's hand as well as at the far right as a child. Then finishing with *'The Upper Class at Bay'* (Figure. 7) showing adult Tim and his wife strolling towards their Cotswold mansion and everything in between. In this exhibition there is a main character, a plot with beginning and ending and a linear progression with covers key events in the characters life, much like a story or graphic novel. This then poses the question is this piece illustrative? Therefore consequently is Grayson Perry an illustrator?



"Illustrators blur boundaries and revel in defying categorization; illustrators often work across a range of disciplines, utilizing varied media" (L. Zeegan 2009 p.10)

By this definition Perry would be considered an illustrator as he often challenges preconceptions about art, gender and artists. He also regularly switches his mediums used for creating art being competent in ceramics, tapestry making and traditional painting methods.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay we have continued to question pieces, practitioners and their practices to try and find an answer to whether or not they can be categorised as illustrations or fine art. It has become evident, that somewhere along the lines, the meaning of fine art and illustration overlap making the classification of works and definitions of the terms difficult to resolve. However, is it unfair to solely judge a piece on its classification? For example, it is apparent that pieces such as the Bayeux tapestry, which were created to show the Norman's depiction of the battle, were not designed to be classified by critics hundreds of years after its creation but instead as a lasting record of events. Conditionally it could be argued that it is the decision of the artist as to how they wish themselves or their work to be perceived and it is unwarranted to think any less of them or their work based on how others classify them. The idea declaring that fine art (as a whole) is art for art's sake (Apatoff 2011) is unjust as although the meaning behind fine art may be much more subjective others are still able to appreciate the craftsmanship and endeavour. We should not think any less of Michelangelo's *David* compared to the *Creation of Adam* just because the later depicts an entire biblical storyline, should we?

In conclusion, artists should create work they feel a desire to make whether that be expressing their emotions on a canvas, like the work of Pollock or depicting the complexities of modern society like the works of Perry. When looking at the work we, as spectators, should focus on the artwork, not its classification, regardless of whether or not it has meaning (irrespective of how easily perceived it might be) or the historical period in which it was created. We need to accept that art is subjective, open to interpretation and that not everyone is going to find intrinsic value the same piece. Should art require appreciation in order to be accepted as art? Should it not

be enough for an artist to create work for their own satisfaction, and for others to appreciate its value as art for arts sake?

Referencing

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Figure. 1: Pollock, Jackson (1948), *Number 1A* [oil and enamel on canvas 172.7 × 264.2 cm] Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

Figure. 2: Estes, Richard (1973-1974) *Untitled* [screenprint on printer 85.1 x 119.1 cm] Not On Display

Figure. 3: Buonarroti, Michelangelo (1511) *The Creation of Adam* fresco, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

Figure. 4 : Buonarroti, Michelangelo (1501-1504) *David*, [marbel sculpture 517 x 199cm] Galleria dell'Accademia di Firenze, Florence, Italy.

Figure. 5: (1070) *Bayeux Tapestry*, [embroidery stitched panels of linen cloth (nine panels in total) 6800cm x 50cm] Museum of Bayeux in Normandy

Figure. 6: Perry, Grayson (2012) *The Upper Class at Bay*, [wool, cotton, acrylic, polyester and silk tapestry 200 x 400cm] Not On Display

Figure. 7: Perry, Grayson (2012) *The Adoration of the Cage Fighters*, [wool, cotton, acrylic, polyester and silk tapestry 200 x 400cm] Not On Display

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