

# ILLUSTRATION

A Theoretical & Contextual Perspective



SECOND EDITION

Alan Male

BLOOMSBURY

ILLUSTRATION • 1

## ILLUSTRATION

A Theoretical and Contextual Perspective



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# ILLUSTRATION

## A Theoretical and Contextual Perspective

Second Edition

By Alan Male



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An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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# PREFACE

## **ILLUSTRATION: A DEFINITION Applied Imagery; a 'working art' that visually communicates context to audience.**

This book examines the measure of contextual operation regarding contemporary illustration practice. It also seeks to exemplify theoretical and intellectual processes necessary for the production of accomplished work. It does not emphasize matters of commercial or business practice, nor aspects of media or practical concern such as rendering techniques or technical processes. These issues are best served by volumes specific and dedicated to these subjects. Aimed predominantly at final-year undergraduate and post-graduate students, there is assignation to a defined understanding and application of all modes of project development, including research, subject matter, conceptual processing, context and audience, analysis and visual language.

The discipline of illustration was once an exclusive club, with practitioners remaining firmly within the confines of 'commercial art'. However, the emergence of stock art and the impact and advancement of digital technology have instigated a 'changing face' regarding the discipline of illustration, and many illustrators have had to re-evaluate their practice. Today, there is much emphasis on the acquisition of transferable skills and the ability to multi-task. It is not uncommon for individuals to proclaim a status of 'illustrator-writer' or 'illustrator-designer,' along with some more unusual, varied and disparate combinations.

Illustration practice is not judged purely by visual literacy and technical qualities, but rather is a discipline that engenders the best intellectual engagement with subject matter, problem solving and visual communication. Illustration can also be applied to anything and is not driven purely by fad or trend. The global community is its potential audience.

This book explores the breadth of use for illustration and does not discriminate. It presents a collective of five distinct and separate contextual domains that constitutes

the role of illustration: documentation, reference and instruction; commentary; storytelling; persuasion; and identity.

Whilst engaged in what is broadly an objective and pragmatic approach to processes and outcomes, illustrators can and do proactive authorship of and expertise on many aspects of contextual operation. It is this concern that provides a certain platform and underpinning too much regarding an examination of contemporary practice. The notion of illustrator as 'colouring-in technician' must be discarded!

The inclusion of a fourth chapter further emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary practice, multi-tasking and the significance of the *Polymath Principle*. There are also 260 fresh images published in this edition; this is to represent the contemporaneous 'ebb and flow' in vogue, context and communication as the discipline of illustration progresses further into the twenty-first century.

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# INTRODUCTION

In one form or another, illustration has been in existence for centuries, but has only been recognized as a distinct discipline fairly recently. In the USA its importance was recognized by the founding of the Society of Illustrators in 1901, but it is still scorned by sections of the fine art community because of its commercial grounding. As a visual language and medium it has had many loose and disparate descriptions over the years, including painting, engraving, commercial art, cartoons, pictures in books and drawing. It is often confused with other disciplines, most notably graphic design and fine art, perhaps because there is an occasional overlap. However, it has a distinct core that is unlike anything else, and it is this that defines its *raison d'être*. Illustration is about communicating a specific contextualized message to an audience. It is rooted in an objective need, which has been generated by either the illustrator or a commercial-based client to fulfil a particular task. It is the measure and variety of these different tasks that makes the discipline of illustration such an influential visual language.

Previous generations were informed, were educated or had their opinions swayed by commissioned paintings – pictures of glorious victories in battle, scenes of outrageous sporting endeavour, religious icons and heavenly splendour, flattering or deliberately not-so-flattering portraits. Contemporary generations are also greatly influenced by illustration, and because of the media of print, moving images and more recently the digital revolution, accessibility is everywhere. This also defines a distinctive feature of the discipline in that nearly every image classed as illustration is reproduced and distributed often on an international scale. So, what messages are impressed on society by illustration? Most people have been influenced by children's books. These have been described as 'holding the key to worlds locked inside the imagination, as well as depicting worlds that exist but cannot be seen.' Children's picture books, whether fiction or non-fiction, feed us attitudes and information and help to develop our visual senses and intellect. The creative possibilities of illustration are limitless. Away from a contextual need for literal truth, illustration becomes unfettered by reality, and one's

imagination is free to create images and conjure up atmospheres. An illustration can also shock a newspaper reader into taking notice of a contentious argument, can give a bland, faceless company a new identity and can send any product into a fantasy world that might appeal to a potential buyer.

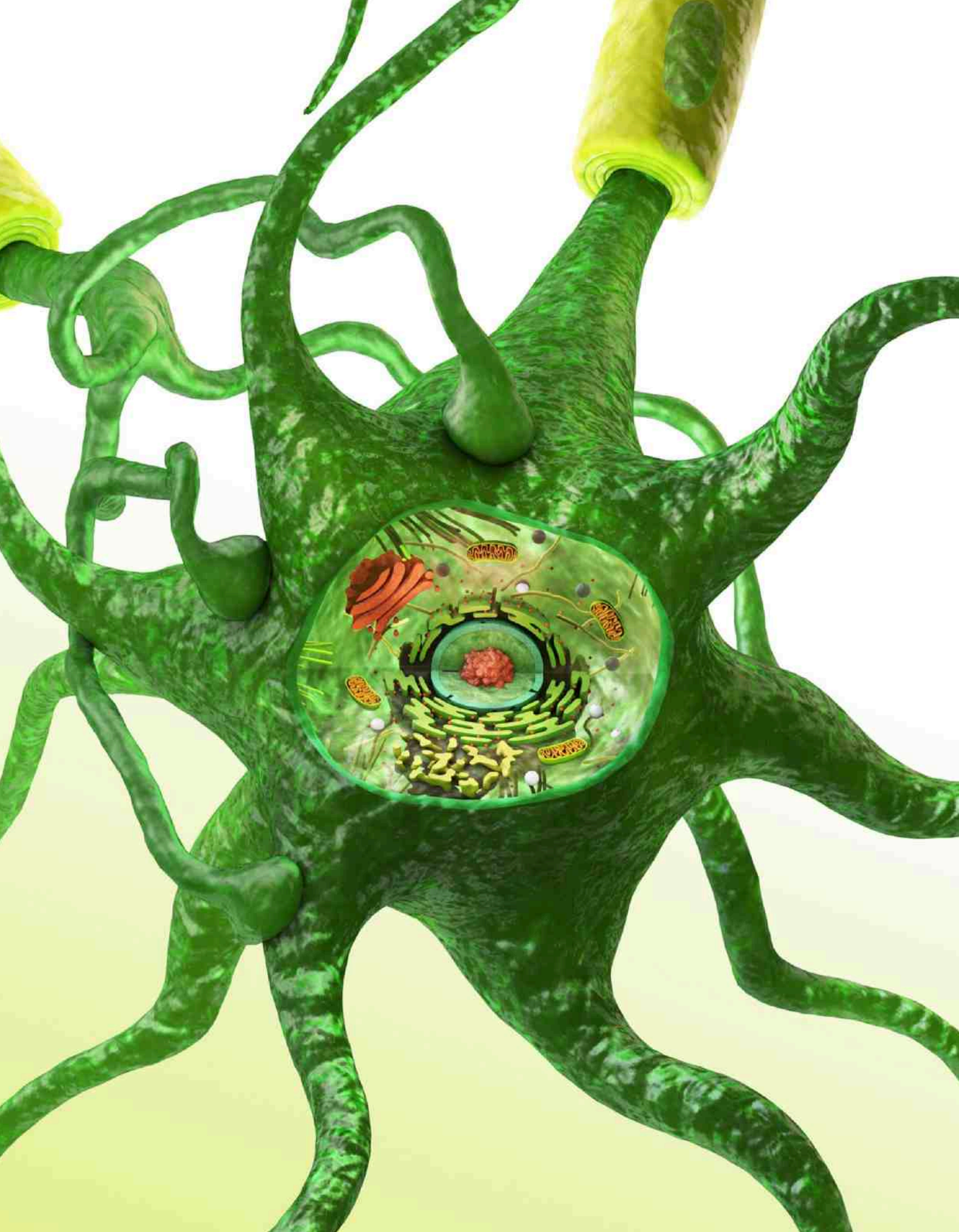


# THE ILLUSTRATOR

What are the qualities, attributes and skills that make for a successful, practicing illustrator? This question is particularly relevant today where there is shifting and blurring of boundaries between disciplines, particularly in the creative and media industries. To begin with, it is widely acknowledged that one of the initial aspects of an illustrator's education is the acquisition of practical skills. The operative skills associated with contemporary illustration practice involve the utilization of a range of media, both traditional and increasingly digital – for example, promoting oneself by way of a website has become the norm. Sound academic drawing practise is also an essential underpinning for most aspects of illustration, irrespective of the visual language or style one is associated with. The externalization and visualization of concepts and ideas are best deployed by the process of drawing. The application of creative processing to problems of visual communication and the innovative use of design and conceptualization are also essential, facilitated by the natural 'gift' of visual intelligence. It is unfortunate, however, that some commissioning art directors and illustration tutors place importance on the superficiality of visual language and the commercial constraints placed upon it to conform to trends and fashion. In education, the student illustrator is often under pressure to 'break new ground' and push the boundaries of the subject. This usually means the production of so-called 'innovative' mark-making that does nothing to consider the real business of illustration.

In a professional context, successful, forward-thinking illustrators no longer operate the way many did and some still do, as merely 'colouring in technicians,' receiving briefs that are heavily directed and prescribed regarding content and overall visual concept. Many illustrators 'take the lead,' or are given it, in terms of directing a project or commission. This has a significant bearing on the professional process and means that the best illustrators are often educated, as well as socially and culturally aware. They need to have knowledge of, be authoritative about and have empathy for a great many topics and subjects, particularly those they may be required to engage with as part of a brief. They also

need to be mindful of current affairs and opinion and be contemporary with society at large and trends in visual language and media. Illustrators need to have knowledge, understanding and insight regarding the context within which they are working and the subject matter they are engaged with. They also must be able professionals working within the parameters and needs of the marketplace and target audiences. They need to utilize a breadth of intellectual and practical skills that might once have been regarded as transferable from other disciplines but today are considered essential if the illustrator has ambitions to transcend the role of commissioned 'hack'.



# 1

# EDUCATION

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// **SUCCESSFUL, FORWARD-THINKING ILLUSTRATORS NEED TO BE EDUCATED, SOCIALLY AND CULTURALLY AWARE COMMUNICATORS UTILIZING A BREADTH OF INTELLECTUAL AND PRACTICAL SKILLS.** //

## Education

The acquisition of practical skills such as traditional, autographic rendering techniques and digital, new technology-based skills is essential for the education of the illustrator but must also be regarded as a form of training associated with the vocational aspects of illustration and encountered early in one's development. As the illustrator enters the final leg of his or her education, the development of a personal iconography through drawing, media exploration and visual interpretation should be more or less established. It has to be considered an almost superficial activity compared to the depth of engagement required when dealing with the complex issues of creative processing and research for solving problems of contextualized visual communication.

### 1.1

The terrorist attack on the offices of the Paris-based satirical Magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015 provoked an outpouring of visual condolences from illustrators worldwide. Here, **Joey Guidone's** concept demonstrates both poignancy and message in equal measure. (© Joey Guidone: SalzmanArt.com)

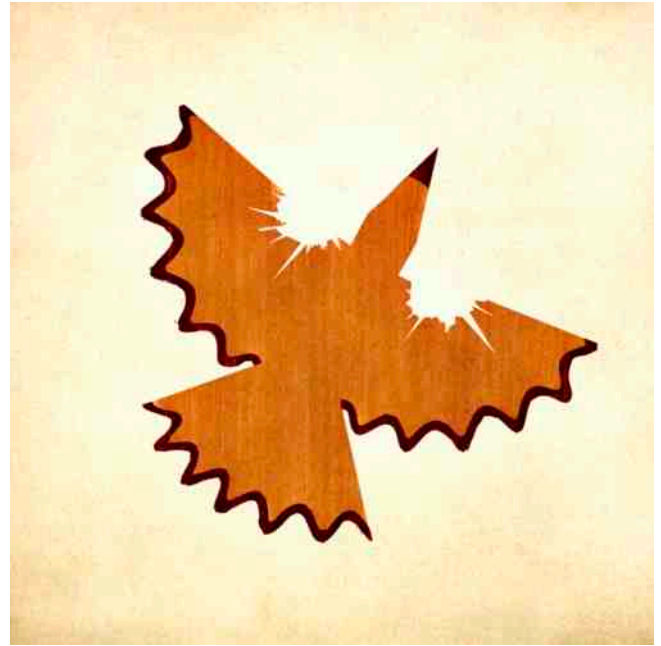
### 1.2

Entitled 'Eye Spy,' this is the World Illustration Award Winner (2015) for the Editorial Category. Conceived and produced by **Rebecca Hendin**, it depicts 'the paranoia-inducing ubiquity of surveillance in contemporary society'. Created for *Strike* magazine, an ad-free, independent, left-leaning bi-monthly publication concerning 'politics, philosophy, art, subversion and sedition,' the image is imbued with a vision of dark undertones 'in which no one truly knows who is watched and who is watching...'

## The Programme of Work

For advanced-level study in higher education, the projects and assignments should not replicate the heavily art-directed and prescribed briefs given to professional illustrators by certain clients nor merely be in place to provide further development of visual language or technical skills. Work undertaken should provide a platform to demonstrate a systematic understanding of knowledge and a critical awareness of new insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of the discipline of illustration. This work should enable the student illustrator to demonstrate a practical understanding and application of established methodologies regarding research and enquiry, and use it to create and interpret knowledge. The projects should also enable the student to demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems, planning and implementing tasks. These challenges are commensurate with the notion that successful, forward-thinking illustrators need to be educated, socially and culturally aware communicators utilizing a breadth of intellectual and practical skills.

The programme of work undertaken should be negotiated and based on personal choice, such as a particular interest in a topic and/or having empathy and aptitude for a certain context. The principal aim of the assignment should always be to solve a problem of visual communication. The task should be clear and unambiguous, and its rationale should be to advance knowledge and understanding and to develop intellectual and practical skills to a high level.



1.1



1.2

## Developing the Brief

An illustration assignment or project brief at this advanced level of study should contain three distinct and clearly defined directives.

**The Rationale** – why you are undertaking this task.

**The Aim** – what it is you are going to do?

**The Objectives** – how you intend to proceed; a clear list of methodologies to be employed.

### THE RATIONALE

There should be a theme or body of knowledge and an identifiable need for visual communication. What has informed this choice and why? The project should be an example of one of the following:

a. A professional practice area of context. Examples may be: information given by way of a publishing medium, promotional and persuasive material to be displayed publicly in a large printed format, narrative fiction for a young audience, or corporate material produced as moving imagery and embodied into an internet website. The context must be clearly established – the job of work the illustration(s) is/are intended to do – as this determines a substantial part of the problem-solving process.

b. A question that needs answering, creating a need to research and present new knowledge. If so, is the audience specialist or non-specialist? This would be a scholarly research-based thesis that manifests as a visual essay and contains substantial critical analysis, a review of the subject's historical and contemporary placement, and a conclusion expounded by both written and visual work.

The rationale should convey existing knowledge or empathy regarding the theme of the project. It may be something that one has engaged with in a previous project, and the intention is to develop this further and produce a more challenging 'follow-on'. There may be some extra-curricular association or experience that can provide additional insights. Choices made at this stage may inform and assist future development of one's post-higher education ambitions and, although academically and professionally challenging, should broadly reflect interests, capabilities and aptitudes.

### THE AIM

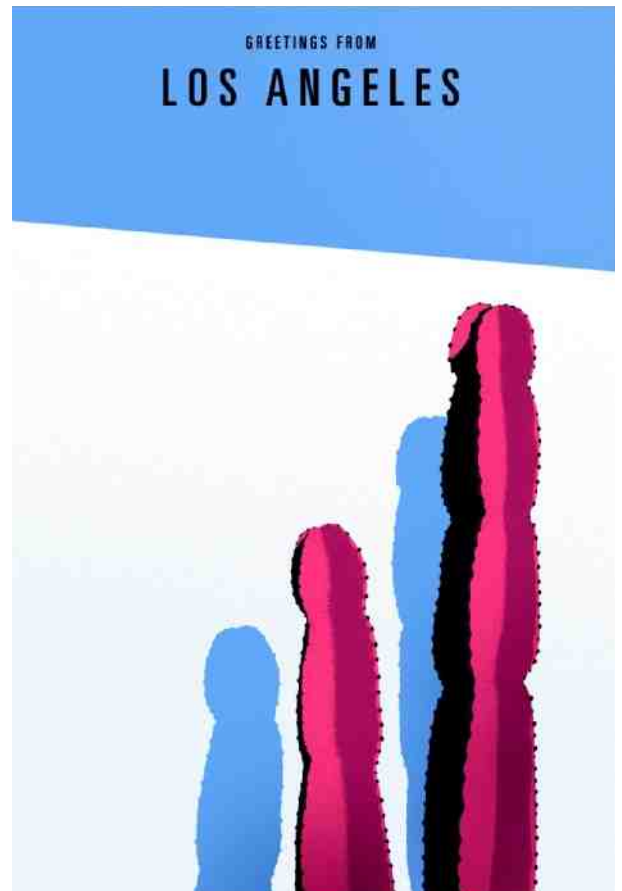
The nature and full extent of the project should be clearly set out stating what the outcome is to be and what will manifest at its conclusion – for example, the amount of development work, presentation visuals/dummies, and artworks/finished imagery.

### THE OBJECTIVES

As well as stating how one intends to action the proposed work, there should also be a clear timetable laid out. The objectives should identify new knowledge outcomes and how the intended work will facilitate professional and academic development.

**THE PROJECT SHOULD BE AN EXAMPLE OF ONE OF THE FOLLOWING: EITHER A PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE AREA OF CONTEXT OR A QUESTION THAT NEEDS ANSWERING, CREATING A NEED TO RESEARCH AND PRESENT NEW KNOWLEDGE.**

1.3  
**Thomas Danthony** has conceived and designed a set of posters to promote the many virtues of Los Angeles.



1.3



1.4

**1.4**

This is one of a series of images by **Katie Ponder** collectively entitled *The Rite of Spring*. An Association of Illustrators New Talent Award Winner, the imagery has been devised as an audio-visual book to accompany Stravinsky's music.

**ILLUSTRATION INFLUENCES THE WAY WE ARE INFORMED AND EDUCATED, WHAT WE BUY AND HOW WE ARE PERSUADED TO DO THINGS. IT GIVES US OPINION AND COMMENT. IT PROVIDES US WITH ENTERTAINMENT AND TELLS US STORIES.**

## Answering the Brief

The initial process to undergo is one of analysis. What is the problem of visual communication that needs to be solved, and what is it that one is actually communicating, to whom and for whom? First, identify and understand the context. What is the nature of the task required of the imagery? Then explore the content and subject matter that is being dealt with. Is there a need for research and/or to find out more than is already known about the subject? 'Only an intelligent analysis of the information generated by the briefing process can lead to an appropriate visual solution.' Richard Steel, *Illuminations: Solving Design Problems Through Illustration*.

### CONTEXTS

The foremost assertion is a philosophical one relating to a definition of what the discipline of illustration actually is. The author has already described it previously as a 'working art' that visually communicates context to audience (traditionally through drawing). It demands an approach that is both objective and pragmatic regarding its working processes and outcomes. Unlike fine art, the discipline it is most frequently confused with or compared to, illustration is not necessarily cultivated for its own sake and is not meant as a pandering to any intrinsic pleasures it affords the minds and emotions that might experience it. So, without a context, an image cannot be described as being an illustration. The contexts of working practice, in other words the different 'jobs of work' illustration does, are paramount to understanding its relevance and importance as a modern medium of visual communication. Illustration is seen everywhere, and its potential and working possibilities are endless. It influences the way we are informed and educated, what we buy and how we are persuaded to do things. It gives us opinion and comment. It provides us with entertainment and tells us stories. The best illustrations accomplish the successful and, where appropriate, creative transfer of particular messages to prescribed audiences. There are five generally and broadly recognized contextual domains: Information, Commentary, Narrative Fiction, Persuasion and Identity. It is likely that any brief initiated here will conform to at least one of these domains, although any combination is possible.



1.5



1.6



When I was just a young boy, about ten years old, I was told by my pappy that I was becoming a man. "In order to become a man, you need to become self-sufficient" says Pap.

1.7



1.8

The contextual domains of illustration practice are represented by the six images depicted here.

**1.5**

*Knowledge*

**Arran Lewis** presents an original concept entitled *Neurotransmitters*.

Commissioned by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), this image is part of a series: *A History of the Brain*. (Copyright Arran Lewis)

**1.6**

*Identity*

**Caroline Tomlinson** has designed and incorporated brand imagery for a retail outlet *Saturdays and Co.*

**1.7**

*Fiction*

**Georgina Tee** has illustrated her own fictional narrative. Entitled *Conjuring Book*, it is an engaging and evocative tale for a young audience. (Illustration © Georgina Tee)

**1.8**

*Commentary*

**Josh McKenna's** editorial illustration delivers a humorous concept to describe dog cloning. It was commissioned by *Wired* magazine Germany.

**1.9**

*Persuasion*

A poster design by **Hugh D'Andrade** that persuades his audience to both participate in and empathize with the sentiments of 'International Workers Day'.

**1.10**

**Bill Mayer** offers 'The Rotten Earth,' a sombre visual commentary produced for 'The Fragile Earth Project' originally exhibited at the Society of Illustrators, New York. Inspired by the novel *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy, the image evokes 'the Earth as a fragile child crying black tears pooling underneath...'



1.9



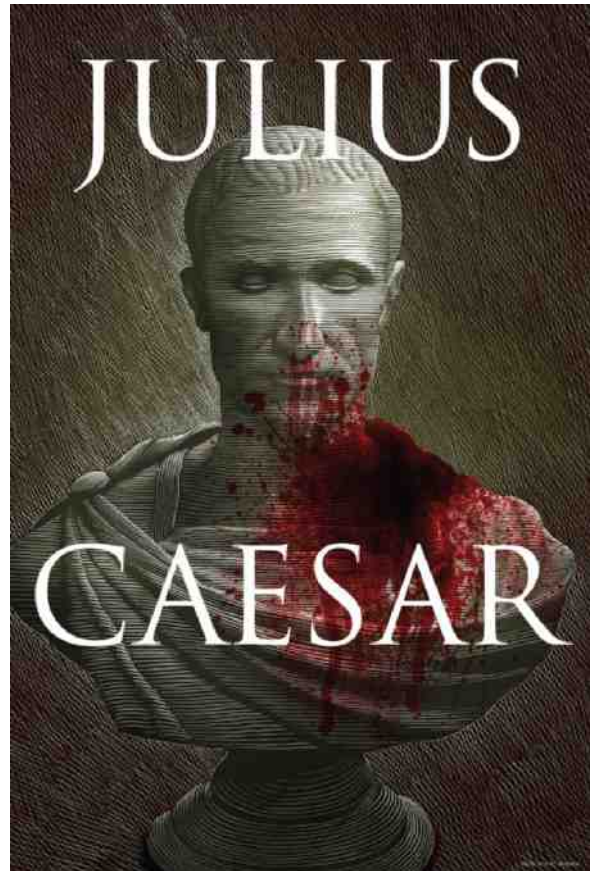
1.10

## AUDIENCES

Understanding the audience is essential for the successful transfer of messages. Fundamental to this is knowing exactly what type of response is required of the audience and whether or not they would 'buy' the message being communicated. Is the requirement for a straightforward message that is objective in nature, such as factual, informative material, or is there a need to be subjective and provoke an emotive response whereby the audience sees something unique in the content and message of the illustration? Visual communication relies on semiotics. This is where the audience interprets and translates signs and symbols, often by association; the deciphering of these meanings can be subconscious.

We live in a multicultural age, and the creative industries in which the discipline of illustration is firmly embedded play across all continents. This has a significant bearing on who an illustrator's audience is for any given brief. Many children's books for example, both fiction and non-fiction, will be produced by a United Kingdom publisher only if they have secured deals with companies in North America and other countries. This can impact greatly on the content of imagery and messages that are imparted. Therefore, the illustrator has to adopt a multinational and cross-cultural approach. What may be acceptable material for Northern Europeans or Americans may not be understood or appreciated by nationalities elsewhere. The content of non-fiction books, especially for children, has become more authoritative. Much emphasis is on accuracy of information and affirmation of ethics and precepts related to subject matter, such as respect and support for ecology, conservation and the environment; an avoidance of jingoism and prejudice regarding social and historical material; and an application of equality and fairness regarding culture, race and gender. Many publishers take the editorial line that it is essential for illustrators to respect and adhere to these maxims.

The advertising industry tends to be prescribed and sometimes produces campaigns that are regionalized within a single country. The message is often to persuade a particular type of customer to purchase a product best suited to them only. In this context, it can be expedient to categorize the audience by gender, age, social background and income.



1.11

### 1.11

*Publishing: Quality Non-Fiction*  
An appropriately powerful image for the cover of a Julius Caesar biography, designed and illustrated by **Scott McKowen**.

### 1.12

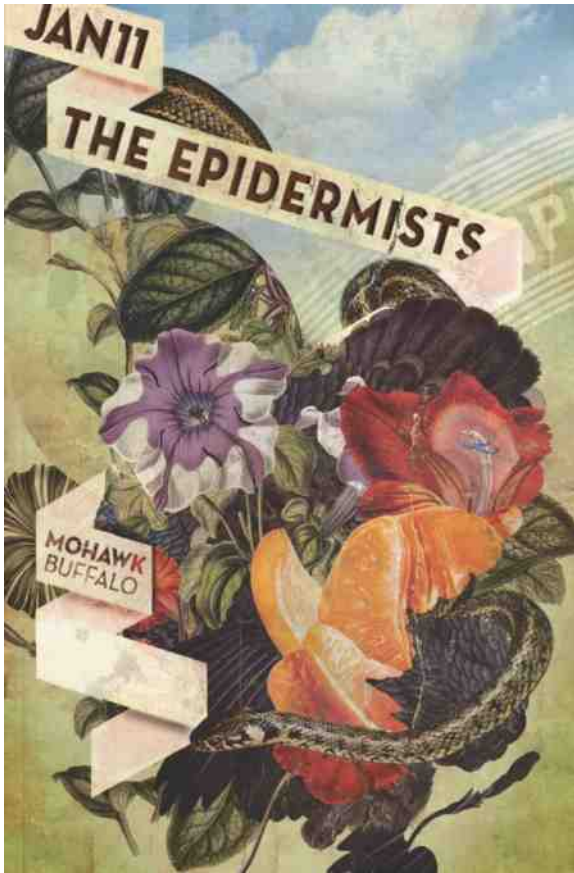
*Advertising*

A promotional poster for 'The Epidermists' by **Nicholas Lambert**, commissioned by The Mohawk, Buffalo, USA.

### 1.13

*Promotion*

**Carrie May** promotes the colours, texture, aesthetics, atmosphere and evocation of Assisi in Italy, along with the Basilica of St Francis.



1.12



1.13

## CLIENTS

As previously described, one of the defining features of the discipline of illustration is that its need has been generated either by the illustrator or by a commercial-based client. If it is self-generated, commercial outlets, such as publishers, must be willing to provide production, distribution and therefore accessibility to the potential customer/audience. However, with a certain amount of business acumen it can be possible to self-publish and establish one's own appropriate marketing opportunities. In this circumstance, self-publishing does not mean 'self-indulgence' or the production of overtly 'personal work'. Whatever the genre of written or visual work being published, a prerequisite to determine its credibility would be that it is peer reviewed and/or subjected to editorial quality control. However, as has been stated before regarding the formulation of negotiated projects in an educational circumstance, initiating a brief of this sort does not mean excluding personal interests. The concept of the illustrator as a specialist or authority on a particular subject or as an originator of fiction and/or non-fiction material has become widely accepted. With commercial clients, there is no need to dwell upon the subtlety of difference between individuals working within a range of organizations. Neither is there a need to analyze their role and function or to examine how they actually commission illustration. It is, however, essential to know and understand the outlets for illustration. In a broad sense, these 'outlets' can be described as clients. The list on page 25 provides an overview of principal outlets for the commissioning of illustration: