

The History of Illustration Project: An Interdisciplinary Journey

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The History of Illustration project has been flying under the radar since its inception in early 2013, following initial stirrings in 2012. A web presence will undoubtedly come when we get the volunteer hours to do it. In the meantime, I am writing up my autobiographical take on it, and posting it here on jaleengrove.com, in response to editor Susan Doyle's request to tell her my personal background as it pertains to why I took HIP on, and what the first stages were of developing it.

My background

I came to illustration initially as a practitioner, while also pursuing a gallery-art career. I began writing about illustration and fellow illustrators and illustrative fine artists almost immediately at age 21 as a member of the Island Illustrators Society in Victoria, British Columbia. When I was 26, I met the son and daughter of British illustrator Olive Allen Biller (1879 – 1956), and Allen's estate became my first art history and conservation project. At this time—late 1990s—there were very few institutions with an interest in illustration history in Canada and it took me until 2005 to convince an archive (University of British Columbia Special Collections) to take Allen's work.

Meanwhile, because of the deep rift that then still existed between narrative, figurative art and so-called contemporary art, I had been struggling with the perennial question of "Is illustration art?" Although I firmly believed the answer was *yes*, self-identified "fine" artists and historians and curators were quite sure it was *not*. I completed a BFA at an art school with no illustration program then, and absolutely no contact between the art and the design departments (Emily Carr Institute, 1999). There, in the art stream, I began to call attention to and critique the construction of value in the art world, employing a cross-comparison of media, styles, and methods (including illustration) that culminated in a solo show in which I auctioned off the works; people had to bid reasons, rather than money, demonstrating their own value(s) as they defined why each piece had value for them. It was a deeply frustrating project that initially silenced my bewildered professors and proved that I was not cut out to kowtow to the hegemony of the contemporary art market—very uncool. I graduated with straight A's but little encouragement, and I mostly stopped exhibiting. I headed straight into a job as Senior Illustrator for an online comic strip cum ad agency—userfriendly.org. Then I spent three years as an in-house graphics and multimedia tech at a university, where I also set up an artist residency at the university's farm. These two jobs rejuvenated my faith in the importance of applied art and community art.

Unable to get into an MFA program in art due to my interest in working across the art/illustration/design divides, feeling like the contemporary art market was ridiculous anyways, and wanting to address the shocking lack of understanding

among fine artists about the commercial arts, I completed an MA in Communication and Culture with a thesis about the status and definition of illustration (“But Is It Art? The Construction and Valuation of Illustration in Victoria’s Island Illustrators Society,” Ryerson and York Universities, 2006). This finally brought me into contact with others who cared about illustration history, and earned the support of scholarship juries. I decided to do a Ph.D. on the cultural role of illustrators (“A Cultural Trade? Canadian Magazine Illustrators at Home and in the United States, 1880-1960,” Stony Brook University, 2014).

One of the first things I did for my Ph.D. was begin work at Illustration House, the venerable gallery and archive started by Walt Reed. Walt’s son Roger Reed and I began a long conversation about illustration history that continues to this day. In the process of graduate school I curated an exhibition with Reed, I facilitated the transfer of more illustrators’ estates to institutions, I was asked to speak to colleagues and students, I published monographs on illustrators and academic articles, and I taught History of Illustration at Parsons The New School—where my boss, Steve Guarnacchia, encouraged me to write the History of Illustration. But I felt it was too big and important for one person to handle.

Meanwhile, the contemporary art world began to take an interest in illustration, and with it, so did art historians and curators who formerly scoffed. Suddenly it seemed like everyone was attempting to put “visual culture” or “text and image” (many cannot quite palate the word illustration to this day) into their programs. While this interest is welcome, there is still a huge vacuum of ignorance and misunderstanding clinging to it. The 2011 Lyonel Feininger retrospective at the Whitney, for instance, included original comics pages—but labeled them offset lithographs (I’m pretty sure they are rotogravures). Just last week an art history doctoral student parroted to me the old cliché that painters who illustrated did so only to make money, implying that their illustration was not serious or artistically satisfying work. These experiences have convinced me that if illustrators don’t start theorizing and recording their own history, someone else will—and do us wrong.

Throughout this journey I have always moved between worlds—not just art worlds, but also several silos in academia (visual communication, art history, visual culture); and between dealers, galleries, museums, and collectors. I also made illustration research friends in three countries—Canada, the United States, and England. I am perennially in-between, and my role has evolved into being a kind of envoy between camps that don’t always get along. I have a sense of belonging everywhere and nowhere at the same time—which precisely mirrors what illustration is: an interdisciplinary phenomenon that defines meaning everywhere.

This interdisciplinarity is what underpinned my article “Netting Jellyfish: A Point of View on Illustration Research From The United States and Canada” (*Journal of Writing in Creative Practise* Volume 4, No. 3, June 2012), where I called for a sharing of knowledge from the three spheres of practice, connoisseurship, and academia. The opportunity to write this came from Desdemona McCannon, Adrian Holme, Jim Walker, Sheena Calvert and others in England who I had reached out to when I began to put together an academic journal for illustration studies. Finding that they were well underway with the Illustration Research Symposia and were also starting what has since become the *Journal of Illustration* (launched Fall 2013),

I decided to merge my journal plans with theirs. Needless to say, they were thinking of writing the History of Illustration too.

The History of Illustration Project

I am always bumping into people who ask me to write the History of Illustration, or who say they are writing one themselves, or who know someone who already is. Funny how none of these books ever appear. The demand is plain: everyone who teaches History Of is forced to reinvent the wheel—and falls back on unreliable, unverified sources; repeating a certain canon without ever questioning it—or making up their own, at risk of leaving students from different institutions with no lingua franca. But, traversing so many different areas of illustration, literary studies, science, visual communication, visual studies, and art history, it becomes clear that no one person could ever do it well alone—they would inevitably write only from their own perspective, and there is just too much material for one person to cover. In fact, to attempt it would be to imperil the field, because with what publishers consider a limited market, there would be only one shot at it—we can't mess it up, because it will represent us all for a LONG while. With a great deal of skepticism still haunting art and academia as to whether illustration is sophisticated in thought and expression, and with so many conflicting stakes among the three spheres of practice, academia, and connoisseurship, to issue anything less than a group effort would be to set the field back irreparably. A group effort also maximizes buy-in and support from as many stakeholders as possible.

In 2012, following Whitney Sherman telling me of yet another rumour that someone wanted to write the book (this turned out to be Susan Doyle), I decided that we should determine the need, the wish list, the who, and the what. Also, we had better flush out all these purported drafts underway, so that there wasn't an accidental disastrous splitting of the already-small book market. I was also very anxious to document the various stakes and expectations, so that they could be addressed and included. I am not neutral in this: I had a personal agenda, which was that I wanted something that taught the reader to appreciate illustration AND to analyze it too, for its cultural impacts, in a manner that would earn the esteem of the art world and academics. You would not be wrong to read a little personal revenge fantasy on the art world into this; I beg forgiveness because I know that my experiences and desire to stick up for illustration is shared.

To that end I was keen that actual trained historians and theorists of visual communication be involved. We all have our prejudices, and as a graduate student I had been indoctrinated with a high regard for academic standards of documentation, theorization, and writing. But subsequent collaboration has reminded me the self-taught are perfectly capable of rigour too, even without reading Foucauld, as I once was when I embarked on Olive Allen Biller's estate.

To begin the mammoth task of gaining knowledge and self-knowledge of our field for the purposes of planning a book, Whitney Sherman and I drafted up a 30-question survey. Participants were asked to self-identify as students, practitioners,

educators, academics, dealers, collectors—which then allowed us to filter results so that we could plainly see what each group expected and wanted.

I was very concerned to keep this research and its results in the public domain—to be used by whoever ended up doing the book (I knew that wouldn't be me, because of my full schedule and lack of institutional affiliation). I asked the New York Society of Illustrators to act as the repository for the finished survey and to be the sponsor, and they agreed.

The survey launched in the fall of 2012 and immediately it opened up discussion, or should I say dissent? Murray Tinkelman, who once thought of writing the book himself back in the early 1970s, and to whom we owe so much for making History of Illustration a standard part of illustration students' education, expressed alarm at my desire to make illustration history more academically rigorous and to teach students critical analysis skills comparable to what students in art history, media studies, and visual studies receive. He is not alone, and what is being served and protected by those who share his doubts goes to the very core of illustrators' sense of collective identity. It needs to be drawn out, articulated, and accommodated as we go forward.

At the same time, we need to keep our eyes on what demands are placed on illustration students by the colleges and universities, and what students need in order to not just work in the field but to explain illustration to outsiders; to combat those perennial prejudices among gallery owners, art historians, curators, theoreticians, and critics. Simply ignoring outsiders and critics leaves our field and its history open to ravage, intellectually and materially. I also believe that giving students critical and philosophical tools will make them better, more original creators. And it will prepare those who wish it to go on to graduate level study or interdisciplinary work.

We circulated the survey through word of mouth and social media, and presented it at that year's Society of Illustrators Educators' Forum. The survey asked for people who wished to contribute to a textbook—and for those writing one already—to come forward. Several volunteers emerged, but despite all the rumours, no authors came out. The survey closed in December 2012, with about 300 people completing it, and its results are available in several PDFs from the Society or from me or from the History of Illustration Wordpress site.

And there it sat, as I struggled on with my doctoral work. In January 2013, the esteemed illustrator and blogger James Gurney asked what had come of the survey. He had started a great discussion about the need for a textbook on Feb 14, 2011 (<http://gurneyjourney.blogspot.ca/2011/02/why-is-there-no-illustration-history.html>) that had helped guide the draft of our survey, and he had kindly helped circulate it. I explained it was on the back burner, and remarked that there would be no book that would please everybody, since the differences between what students, academics, practitioners, fans and so on wanted were rather glaring.

James' response took me by surprise. He simply issued a mass email to fifteen people with illustration history know-how, titled, "How could we create a 'History of Illustration' textbook?" He wrote:

I understand the obstacles you mentioned to creating an illustration textbook, but I firmly believe there is a way past those obstacles.

[...]

Imagine an illustration history that features enough important images at a good scale to please the artists, without skimping on the text. The text would have to be concisely edited and checked and sourced to the highest academic standards, but that can be done.

[...]

Such an undertaking would take a collaboration of a team of people. You and I probably already know the people who would care about such a project . . . No one has time, but there could be a division of labor. Perhaps some existing written pieces could be adapted. Important institutions, such as the NRM and the DAM could provide invaluable help. . . Feel free to share these thoughts to continue the discussion. James Gurney (Jan. 9, 2013)

Within hours the Norman Rockwell Museum had offered up a space to hold a meeting, and other people were nominated for inclusion in the discussion. I replied and cc'd a further two dozen people, including the ones who had responded to the survey's call for participants, and a cross-section of academics, educators, and other stakeholders. I also invited my colleagues in England. While visiting their Illustration Research Symposia in Manchester and Krakow in 2011 and 2012, I had noted that for them, the blending of practice, critical theory, and history in teaching curricula and professional work was well established. I felt their input and experience would offer much and help make us more internationally relevant. Print culture, after all, has always been globalized.

Immediately in the email thread there was excitement, many ideas flying about, and maybe a little defensive surprise that so many illustration historians actually existed. Susan Doyle made her first appearance, writing:

I am interested in this project especially because I feel we need to advance understanding of the importance of illustration as an academic discipline. As others have said, most of the teaching resources I've found, while attractive, are generally a panoply of pictures and scantily contextualized biographies that miss the bigger picture. . . we need to create an encyclopedic overview that explains how imagery inflects thought- and therefore impacts behaviour and moves culture. I would be interested in writing it and could probably wrangle some historians from Brown [University] to advise on the finer points of history.

(Jan. 11, 2013)

Finally, an author! She was the only one to volunteer to take the lead.

The desire for academic standards was echoed by Walter King, who wrote, “. . . the results must be peer reviewed . . . I really believe this must be overseen, written and edited primarily by PhD's and real historians when and where possible. It must be academically proper, factual, and as unbiased as possible” (Jan. 12, 2013). This strong demand from some for more academic rigour rubbed others the wrong way. I received a private email on Jan. 11 that complained, “You know, i.m.o., this is already being steered too soon and too forcefully by the academicians in the crowd . . . I think I'll just shut up and take a back seat. Like I said initially, happy to help if I'm called upon to do so, but I have no interest in a dick swinging competition.” Another advocate for ditching academia told me the book should have more images than

text, because in their experience, all students need to do in order to become visually literate is *look* at the images, not talk about them.

One of the first discussions was whether the book should be only American illustration history, or global. Rightly, many expressed concern that a global history would be too big to tackle. The survey showed, however, a strong interest in a global history (and we have since adopted that course). Rick Schneider, a veteran professor of illustration history, wrote:

I do not believe that a textbook on solely American illustration is what will best serve undergraduate students [but] the proposition of creating a single text on the history of illustration seems to me to be both daunting and ultimately inadequate. [...]

Schneider had another view that many shared:

Undergrads do 99% their research online. If they had a primary online source point which was scholarly and as accurate as possible and always deepening in its coverage, now that would be something vital.

Going further, I would propose something like an entire “Wikipedia” on the subject. A wiki isn’t finite and is categorizable and editable by its defined contributors. . . . [This project] should also be a body of knowledge unlimited by category, region, or era and accessible to all. (Jan. 14, 2013)

Schneider continued to eloquently champion a web delivery, and while it seemed to me that few if anybody disagreed with him, a significant number wanted a classic paper tome too for a variety of reasons. For one, the publishing industry is still organized around a traditional textbook and it’s easier to produce, to fund, and to get copyright for. And, I suspect a lot of us are just attached to books for habitual reasons, sentiment, and a certain nagging sense that a book nestled between Meggs’ *History of Graphic Design* and Janson’s *History of Art* legitimates us.

Are we blinded by our emotions and our history of being dismissed? I will leave that question hanging.

Charley Parker set up a Wordpress site where we moved the discussion in order to spare everyone’s inboxes, and where we could post the survey results (<http://historyofillustration.wordpress.com>). Several important debates and proposals were made there, and the inevitable and necessary arguments about canon and the definition of illustration appeared immediately. Doug B. Dowd of Washington University worried that any focus on hallowed artists and original art objects would come at the loss of respect for illustration’s functions and more ephemeral printed forms. Gurney proposed a “Primary Source Project”—a dedicated repository of estate materials, oral histories, and other primary documents. Schneider began developing ideas for a web delivery. Gurney began soliciting content and form of the book. And I voiced the following:

Whatever book emerges, as the first, will represent the entire field to non-illustrators as well as our students. Given the historical but lingering issue of illustration’s poor status among art theorists (Greenberg), cultural theorists (Adorno), and some current visual culture scholars—and given the pressures on art schools gaining university status to academicize—and given also the need for students to be good verbalizers and thinkers in ways previous generations of illustrators did not have to concern themselves with—it is my

firm belief that if our textbook/history book is not suitably rigorous, it will only serve to reinforce the prejudices against the field. I think a formal peer review process from a range of specialists is necessary to ensure the accuracy, depth and breadth of the information. (Jan. 11, 2013).

Gurney responded:

Jaleen, I don't accept your "givens." May I suggest that it's a mistake to start out with an apologetic or defensive attitude about illustration? I don't give a hoot what Greenberg or Adorno may have thought! This is our story to tell. We're writing the books now. And the story of illustration has never really been told comprehensively. Having a book on the table with the title "The History of Illustration," well-researched, well-illustrated, and engagingly written, will, in itself, effect the critical reassessment that we all hope for.

Our difference of opinion on whether or not to mention and confront anti-illustration visual theory demonstrates exactly why it would have been undesirable and unwise for me—or anyone else—to attempt to write the book alone. I am grateful for Tinkelman, Gurney, and others whose resistance to assimilation with academia has preserved our roots in practice and in our field's own unique values and ways of regarding commercial, decorative, and narrative images. I say, we just need to articulate them in such a way that we are "heard" as well as seen.

The Wordpress served up the survey well—I was able to write critiques of its questions and outcomes—but discussion was very difficult because the interface was a bit tricky, and it required people to make an effort to log on. Seeing the participation petering out by mid-February, I decided to register historyofillustration.com and begin a traditional email list, which we still use. This reinvigorated conversation, and those who had by then decided that the vision for the textbook was not proceeding in a direction they liked politely excused themselves. I truly regret this, given that I always agitated for the inclusion of all perspectives. It is my hope that what we are aiming for—and the balance of practice and theory I expect it will maintain—will find broad acceptance once the book comes out.

Although some people disappeared the group has swelled in number as word got out. As we zeroed in on things, we sought out collectors and scholars with rare bits of verified information and invited them in. The list currently has 60 subscribers, and a core group has emerged that has done most of the leading of discussions and volunteering for tasks.

It's hard to believe that the time from Gurney's mass email to establishing the discussion list was only one month. Coincidentally, in February 2013 I also co-chaired a panel at the College Art Association with Dog B. Dowd. Titled "The Art History of American Periodical Illustration," and featuring Professor Michele Bogart as the official respondent, it was selected by the Association of Historians of American Art as a "professional" session; that is, not to study examples of artworks but rather to discuss how art historians talk (or should talk) about illustration. The high profile of this panel was, to my mind, symbolic of the turning point in art history where suddenly illustration history has become not just visible, but almost fashionable. Still, some academics whom I hoped would come on board with our book have been reluctant, on the grounds that such a practice-based and fan-based

core is just too... hmmm, vernacular? Thus, the camp that doesn't want an academic book is balanced by another camp that wants more theory and footnotes. That tells me we probably are hitting the right balance after all.

At the CAA conference I met with three publishers—Wiley, Oxford University Press, and Bloomsbury—who all gave me useful information and encouraged us to send a formal proposal. Susan Doyle, Rick Schneider, and I had follow-up telephone conference calls with the publishers to further refine our thoughts. It was quickly apparent we would get little to no help with a web-based delivery, so Doyle determined to concentrate on the book idea. Schneider is resolved to explore web-based offerings, which the Rockwell Museum later volunteered to help with, and so he heads up that effort.

On April 26, 2013, we convened a meeting at the Norman Rockwell Museum. About 25 people attended, including Desdemona McCannon and Sheena Calvert from England. There was a good balance of perspectives from educators, historians, museum curators, one dealer, writers, and practitioners. Some of presented our vision for the book and/or website; and we broke into groups to workshop four proposed ways of organizing the book: by material object, by taxonomy of types of illustration (which turned out to relate to social functions), by chronology, and by themes and issues. Doug B. Dowd led a group discussion in which we narrowed down the vision a bit. Susan then produced a list of who had volunteered to write, or research, or peer review to date. We decided to use elements from all four of the proposed methodologies, and to write a continuous narrative interspersed with “theme boxes” to call out alternative points of view and case studies. Since the April meeting, work has mainly been on drafting a table of contents, and lining up authors to lead each section and secondary authors for specialist bits.

In February of 2014, I was once again at the College Art Association meeting, and I followed up with publishers. To my surprise, Wiley declined to meet, saying that they were no longer interested in our book because they intended to concentrate their offering on design-centric topics! This to me is the greatest irony, given that illustration and design used to be one and the same field; and given how often Illustration History has had to fight against being appropriated by the field of Design History. The forthcoming triple volume *Global History of Design* by Victor Margolin (Bloomsbury 2014), for instance, includes some illustration. Fortunately, Thames & Hudson has stepped up to consider our proposal as well.

It is too early to know yet exactly what the publishers will say about our proposal. Certainly our unusual collaborative approach has raised some eyebrows. One publisher predicts that our book draft will be miles too long—that is, if we can successfully wrangle so many contributors.

I say: the skeptics clearly don't realize how desperately this book is longed for. We have decades of pent-up will that will see us through.