

Exploring the Visual Communication of Illustration Narrative in Brand Promotion Through the Symbolic Meaning of Thorn Elements

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Abstract: In today's market, the use of visual representations is increasingly prevalent, with illustrations becoming a key promotion tool. Due to their ability to deliver immediate and powerful impact on viewers, illustrations are now a top choice for companies in advertising. Various styles and techniques of illustration have evolved, enriching the artistic language of advertising; different combinations of elements can evoke diverse reactions and interpretations among audiences. This paper aims to establish a framework for the use of illustration in advertising by analyzing a specific element and its symbolic meanings. It begins with a discussion of the fundamentals of symbolism in illustrations, followed by a detailed analysis of thorn as an artistic concept. The paper concludes by demonstrating how these strategies can be applied in market, offering guidance for future product design and promotions.

Keywords: illustration, narrative, symbolism, thorn, design.

1. Introduction

For decades, scholars have primarily viewed thorns as symbols of suffering to be overcome, with one of the most iconic examples being the thorns on the rose in *The Nightingale and the Rose*. However, their potential for artistic expression is often overlooked. Thorns holds a subtle yet undeniable influence in both ancient and modern literature, in China and around the world. They represent the obstacles that protagonists must conquer after enduring numerous hardships, and they symbolize the hardships themselves. The familiarity and understanding of thorny elements gained from literary works give thorns unique characteristics, allowing the public to recognize and appreciate the cultural meanings conveyed through visual representations. When combined with the expressive and empathetic qualities of illustrations, thorns can serve as powerful mediums for information dissemination and form the basis for brand advertisements and promotions. This study aims to explore the expressive power of symbolic meanings in illustrations and to develop strategies for incorporating these visual elements into brand advertising.

2. Symbolism in Illustrations

2.1. Visual Narratives of the Symbolic Element

When readers look at a picture, the visual compositions of the picture decode into lines and shapes, and the physical light waves consist of these images hit our retinas. Their brains process the information they received, and finally identify the information as meaningful signals rather than nonsense lines [1]. This is the fundamental process of comprehending and interpreting a visual image.

Following that, the connotations readers get from the image depend on the information that are readily in their mind, the more available the information is, the more vivid the connotations are [2] (further information on this topic involves studies about heuristics which this paper does not expand on). When an element with a certain meaning is known, whenever it is perceived, that concept would intuitively come to mind. For instance, the symbol of a rose is most commonly understood to present love, diamonds are most often correlated with engagement and eternity, and the cross which has an indivisible relationship with Christianity. These elements can stand on their own to form an image, and readers will be able to sense the narratives due to their familiarity with the concepts related to these elements.

2.2. Importance of Using Symbolism in Narrative Illustrations

Narrative illustration is the combination of narration and illustration designs. This form of illustration delivers the story through a visual medium in order to communicate information. Visual sense is the most frequently used sensation in humans' approaches to the world, converting literal information into visual signals and illustrative narrations creates a universal pathway for communication, where no cultural barriers would exist in the common understanding of aesthetics and visual representations. In the creation of narrative illustrations, product illustrations especially, designers condense their perception of the product and transform it into appealing images to create impacts on consumers [3]. Illustration contains a unique fusion of visuality, narrative, story, pathos, and visual impacts, synthesized into one single frame and finally connecting the product to the viewer.

Symbolism in illustrations is a method of indirectly transmitting information via an obscure expression. Utilization of symbols omits the need to spend spaces on the canvas to depict secondary stories, instead, these information would be implied by the presence of symbols, forming a more condensed and impactful illustration.

Taking *The Eye Like A Strange Balloon Mounts Towards Infinity* by Odilon Redon as an example, the composition of this drawing is simple, with an eyeball carrying a skull placed in the middle and a dark swamp in the lower quarter of the frame. Yet the image conveys more than that. The eyeball that resembles a hot air balloon symbolizes the spirit rising from death, with the eye that looks upward implying the direction of motion. Would an actual hot air balloon serve the same purpose? The answer is likely no. A inanimate object would not have such strong correlation with humanity and spirit as a physical organ from the human body that has the function of observation. Neither death nor the process of transcending is actually depicted, but readers can still sense the spiritual atmosphere through the utilization of the eyeball as a symbol.

Symbolism allows the artist to convey abstract concepts through tangible representations [4]. Symbols are different from patches of colors, they contain narratives and add meanings to the work. The presence of symbols enriches the artwork such that they can arouse intellectual curiosity, making the work more captivating and engage the readers to find meanings in it. A small symbol can embed an immense amount of information. On one hand, each individual may have a unique understanding of the symbol; on the other hand, the symbol condenses many complex concepts. Conveying the greatest amount of information within a limited scale of canvas would be crucial in advertisements

and interaction design, where the designers want the readers to grab the necessary information instantly as they see the product.

3. The Expression and Practice of Thorn Element in Illustration

3.1. Balancing the Composition

Composition is the basis of every piece of art, a well-considered composition can sometimes have more impact than the subjects being depicted, it can convey the conceptual and semantic meaning of art. The composition of a painting could be summarized into three levels of organization; this paper would examine the first-order pictorial elements of painting: line, shape, and texture [5].

Line is the dominant and fundamental element of almost all design. A bold, straight line can suggest a firm expression, while a smooth, curved line suggests softness. The shape and structure of thorn give it linearity in artistic expressions. Similar to vines and tree branches, thorns can be long or short, thin or thick, straight or curvy; however, the spike on the thorns give it uniqueness. The spikes on the thorns have expansive visual effects, they break out of the smooth curve of the main branches, expanding the form of thorns beyond a singular line. When the thorn is the main object of depiction, the spikes can act as elements to fulfill the frame, they can also be a source of guidance for visual hierarchy in the work; when the thorn is a minor feature, those spikes could serve as focal points. All of these give possibilities for its utilization in compositions.

3.2. Diverse Humanism Connotations of Thorn

Thorn is a commonly seen element in literature, used by virtuosos as an element to enrich the narration. Common perceptions of thorn include challenges and courage, suffering and admonition, the torment of fate and indomitable spirit, sacrifice and honor.

In *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, thorns appear around the prison gate and in the wild rosebush. The thorn here symbolizes both hope and pain, serving as the representation for the duality of shame and grace, and figuratively depicts the adverse shame the protagonist endures, the inner trait of resilience she possesses. In *The Nightingale and the Rose* by Oscar Wilde, a nightingale presses itself against a thorn to create a red rose from its own blood. The thorn in this tale represents the ultimate sacrifice for love and the tragedy of unrequited affection. In *Thorn* by William Wordsworth, the poem focuses on a thorn in a barren moor. The author uses thorn to reflect upon the isolation and the enduring pain of loss.

The crown of thorns is a symbolic feature in Christianity. On the morning of Jesus' crucifixion, the Roman soldiers made a crown out of thorn, mockingly crowned Jesus as the "King of the Jews" [6]. The thorns used to create the crown of thorns were believed to come from the date palm, a specie of thorns with thicker and harder spikes than the thorns of roses. Thorns of date palm are known for its ability to cause acute pain and tissue damage, all contributing to the suffering Christ endured. The crown of thorn is equally important as the cross Christ carried in His crucifixion, both as the symbol for the physical suffering. The crown itself is the symbol of royalty, but under these conditions, the crown twisted from thorn encompasses the representation of sins.

In nature, the spikes of thorns are the result of natural selection. These spikes are effective weapons for defending themselves against the hostile predators, and also strategic approach for saving water under extreme conditions. Thorns are resilient creatures, they are among the few species that can thrive in arid climates, fruits of some thorny plants are vital food source for animals, and their bushy spikes can act as protective shelter for small animals, settling its position as a key component of maintaining ecological stability. Physical features and characteristics of thorns presents a duality of painful sin and protective nature of life.

4. Applications of Symbolism in Brand Promotion

The original intention of advertising designs is to convey information. With the additional application of symbolism in designs, illustrations can achieve precise targeted advertising, forming a more humane approach to visual displays. In the era of rapid progress and innovations, conveying information is a crucial component in emphasizing tonality in designs, while brand promotion places extra weight on effective information transmission.

4.1. Highlight Tonality and Value

Illustration does not rely on literal expressions to communicate information; this genre visualizes the story into lines, colors, and shapes, turning the tedious process of reading product introductions into an entertaining visual experience. The visualized narrative approach enhances the emotional element in the advertisement, visual depictions of certain resonating events could have greater impacts on audiences than words.

The application of symbolism in this process is the emphasis on compressing information. Using symbolic elements with specific connotations in advertisements can bring certain abstract concepts to the consumers. For example, the logo of a Chinese beverage shop *Sexy Tea* is a woman wearing traditional Chinese clothes, and the form of this image references a transitional Chinese folklore *The Romance of West Chamber*: a story of protagonists' revolt against feudal etiquettes and their pursuit of love. The symbolic meanings of this work and the woman's clothing reflect the brand's characteristic of promoting Chinese tea beverages. The combination of modern design and traditional culture presents how the brand aims to develop and expand Chinese culture in response to a developing society.

Furthermore, unique symbolic designs can make the brand more visually compelling and easier to recognize. For instance, the Monogram pattern of Louis Vuitton is a distinctive design consisting of a circulated four-leaved flower, four-pointed star, four-pointed star embedded in a concave diamond shape, and lastly, the overlapping letters L and V. The design of this pattern reflects the transitional Japanese aesthetics that were popular in Europe during that era, and has now become the symbol for Louis Vuitton's pursuit of high quality and delicacy.

4.2. Effective and Intuitive Transmission of Information

Nowadays, people live an accelerated life, acquire of information takes place mostly in fragmented time, thus the time people spend on each piece of information is limited. This change in lifestyle pushes the brand to refine their advertising strategy, create concise and forthright content that could emphasize viewers' impression about the brand.

Illustrations have the ability to deliver specific scenes and stories, and symbols simplify the final presentation so that the audience can receive more information at a glance, while the connotations of the symbol leave a lasting impression of the brand, offering an engaging experience with the advertisement.

5. Conclusion

Art and humanities have always been intertwined. Beneath these seemingly sensory and disorderly disciplines lies a coherent system of rational thinking that shape the abstract yet tangible concept of art. In the fast-paced world of the 21st century, art stands as the only medium that can simultaneously provide quick and intuitive information transmission while offering profound aesthetic value, with illustrations serving as the storytellers of art. The use of illustrations in everyday life is vast, with images that transcend technical limitations, showcasing vividness and delicate emotional expression.

By integrating and combining various symbolic elements into illustrations, a new path of innovation can be forged. Artistic expression is never a solitary concept; it is a synthesis and dialogue between multiple disciplines, as well as a study of interdisciplinary intersections and transformations. The future is always ahead, and the path of progress is inevitably fraught with challenges. Design is the tool that adapts to the changing times, overcoming obstacles and driving continuous innovation and development. This paper, however, has certain shortcomings in scientific theory and lacks precision in marketing principles. With further studies in psychology and behavioral economics, along with professional learning and research in the field of art, more accurate information can be brought to light, filling the gaps in professional understanding.

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