Perception and Expression in the Universe of Fashion Illustrations

Gabriela Kuhnen
Ms, Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina / gabkuhnen@gmail.com
Orcid: 0000-0003-0307-2360 / http://lattes.cnpq.br/6294529988676049

Célio Teodorico dos Santos
PhD, Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina / celio.teodorico@gmail.com
Orcid: /0000-0001-9809-5658 / http://lattes.cnpq.br/0731129342074111
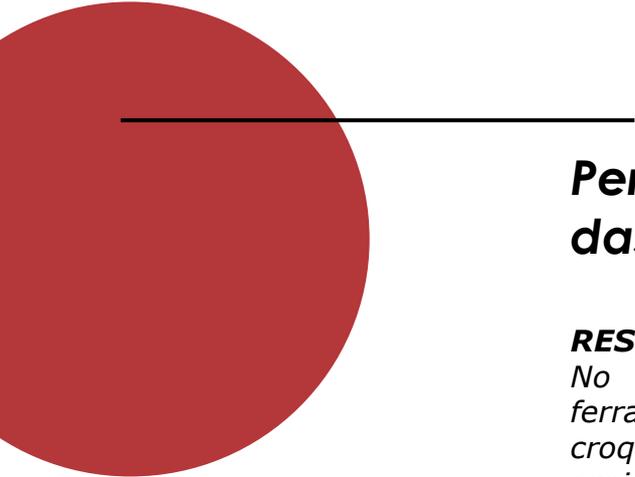
Perception and Expression in the Universe of Fashion Illustrations

ABSTRACT

In the fashion universe, illustrations are very important to publicize products or brands and the fashion illustrations are the beginning to building a product. In the fashion illustration, the graphic elements as dots, lines, surfaces and blots are the basis to represent the figures from this universe. In this sense, expressivity and perception occur both through the aesthetic and formal aspects, as well as the symbolic ones, which, organized in a certain way, become quite relevant, since their main objective is to promote an idea or concept and to establish an impact on the viewer. For this, the present article makes a synthesis on the concepts of visual syntax, aesthetic-formal elements and symbolic associations and aims at applying this theory in the reading of an illustration by Laura Laine, perfecting the understanding about the image to which it refers and making analogies of this image with others it mentions.

Keywords: fashion illustation; reading image; design tools.

Percepção e Expressão no Universo das Ilustrações de Moda

RESUMO

No universo da Moda, as ilustrações são importantes ferramentas para divulgação de produtos ou de marcas, e os croquis ou desenhos de moda estão presentes na forma de projetos e são o início da elaboração do produto em si. Na criação das ilustrações ou croquis, os elementos gráficos visuais, como o ponto, a linha, a mancha e o plano, são a base para a representação de figuras que delineiam este universo. Nesse sentido, a expressividade e a percepção se dão tanto pelos aspectos estético-formais, quanto pelos aspectos simbólicos que, organizados de certa maneira, tornam-se bastante relevantes, já que têm como objetivo principal divulgar uma ideia ou conceito e estabelecer um impacto sobre o espectador. Para tanto, o presente artigo faz uma síntese sobre os conceitos da sintaxe visual, elementos estético-formais, associações simbólicas e busca aplicar essa teoria na leitura de uma ilustração de Laura Laine, aperfeiçoando o entendimento sobre a imagem a qual se refere e fazendo analogias dessa imagem com outras a que faz menção.

Palavras-chave: *Ilustração de moda; leitura de imagens; ferramentas de design.*

1. INTRODUCTION

When looking at an image or illustration, the observer soon realizes if it pleases him or her or if it does not. All the graphic-visual and formal-aesthetic analysis goes through a subjective cognitive process, where the understanding and valuation of what is seen is intimately connected to the capacity of expression and to the message the creator wants to transmit to the observer. Such language has the same basis of verbal communication, with a transmitter and a receiver, in a context that has a common code, where the image carries signals which generally value the being, portraying it as elegant, sophisticated, loose, according to how the illustration is represented.

In this article, we aim at performing a brief analysis, from the reading of a fashion illustration, created by Laura Laine, comparing it to the original piece by Botticelli, considering the most important aspects found at pre-figurative, expressive and symbolic levels. Such elements, which are dots, lines, blots and planes originate adjective elements such as colors, tones and textures. Through the perception of these elements, it is possible to make associations to previously-lived situations and, by doing so, generate other proper meanings to the image, through its composing elements, aiming at creating a contact with the observer in order to delight, seduce and reveal ideas and concepts.

2. NEW CONCEPTIONS IN DESIGN

In the fashion universe, the graphic representation is one of the most relevant points. Whether in fashion design, where sketches are elaborated with the purpose of execution, where a very precise representation, according to the material world, is fundamental since all the details and

proportions will be used in the construction of the piece in the form of graphic prints added to the piece of clothing or even in fashion illustrations, where the pieces are hardly ever represented as they really are, but they establish a message through their composing elements. This aims at establishing contact with the observer in order to reveal, delight and seduce.

Fashion illustrations may be used for several purposes: composing the presentation of the fashion collection for the buyers; showing the media a preview of the coming collection; illustrating fashion shows or fashion trends or even showing a collection through prints (ARMSTRONG, 2007). Mostly, it aims at being the consumers' attention target, creating desire for the piece and making the consumer recognize the product and buy it. The challenge is to make the illustration stand out from the various photo editorials, exactly for being different and working with other forms of expression.

Sometimes fashion illustration translates the humor of the time period when it was created because, besides the artist's style, social and economic forces also determine the illustration's form and content.

Fashion illustration came to be from the technique of woodcut, which consists in carving a drawing into a piece of wood, followed by the application of ink onto it and then pressing it against paper. The result is the printing of the illustration. This method was widely used during the age of navigations and discoveries of new continents, in the 16th and 17th centuries, as a way of portraying a new reality and documenting the clothes of different peoples. With the coming of new mobile types of impression, in the middle of the 16th century, it became easier and cheaper to print and its commercialization became possible. That was when the first books, then called Costumes, came about. These books

portrayed clothes in their locations, description of the pieces and how they should be worn. Later, in the 17th century, journalism and fashion almanacs came into the scene: Printing was still done in black and white and initially aimed at the male public. Also in the 17th century, magazines with colored illustrations appeared. These magazines were widely informative and had the purpose of clarifying, displaying male, female and children outfits, as well as accessories and even articles of decoration (DUARTE, 2009).

With the coming of photography into the magazines' editorials and advertisements, in the 19th century, fashion illustration went on a solo career for several decades, being removed from the exhibition area and style publications. But it was never completely gone and returned in the 20th century.

Following the advance of drawing techniques, illustrations and painting suffered direct results from the technology available in each period. Painting had a meaningful advance when oil-based inks were inserted into aluminum tubes, allowing artists to paint outdoors, when Impressionism was born. Hyper-realism was an artistic movement that aimed at being a reaction to photography, while techniques such as the airbrush came from the culture of acrylic and dyes used in fine arts (ARMSTRONG, 2007).

Fashion illustrations are not immune to the culture of their time, whether in the past, present or future perceptions. Experimentations on different surfaces open many visual possibilities. In each artistic movement, personal experiences influence not only the form of execution of the illustrations but also the form of reading them.

3. ELEMENTS OF VISUAL EXPRESSION AND REPRESENTATION

3.1   Visual literacy

Knowing some principles about the comprehension and reading of fashion illustrations may provide the observer a new relation with the observed object. The knowledge of specific codes, along with the social, cultural and aesthetical relations, allows the attribution of a meaning to the reading of this universe.

The structural systems do not follow absolute rules. They depend on their composition and ordination. The basic elements of visual literacy are the dot, the line, the plane and the blot. Other elements of the visual syntax are the balance, the color, texture, direction, tone, scale, shape, dimension, structure and rhythm.

The dot is the smallest unit of visual communication. It is abundant in nature and may have a great power of visual attraction on the eye. The line is formed by many dots so close to each other that their individual shape can no longer be distinguished. It also may be said that the line defines the trajectory of a dot.

> [...]It is the sketch's restless and inquiring element. Wherever it is used, it is the fundamental instrument of the pre-visualization, the means to present, in a tangible way, something that does not exist yet, except in your imagination. (DONDIS, 1991, p. 56).

In the line, all the extra information is eliminated, only what is essential remains. The intention of the artist or designer is translated, it reflects feelings and emotions. The blot is what enables the variation between light and dark. Through this nuance we realize the complete shape and its variations. The two-dimensional representation is what allows us to translate the tridimensional or give the illusion of depth. The graphic two-dimensional representation can be

made through the closing of the line (shape) or contrast of area (blot).

When these concepts of visual structures of an image are analyzed, we can trace similarities with the concept of the formal beautiful pointed out by Aristotle. According to Bayer (1995), in all that is beautiful there is a rationalist and rational order. One should notice the symmetry, which is a symbol of perfection, the determination, which is a kind of order where everything that is beautiful is finished in its essence, it is health, strength, greatness. Therefore, there is a visual attraction and aesthetic preference towards these characteristics. This way, the illustrator may use these artifacts in order to be able to generate certain answers from the observer.

Lobach (2001) determines some configurative elements, emphasizing that they have little importance separately and that their arrangement is what will bring singular aspects to each piece or image.

- Space shape: characterized by its three-dimensionality and volume.
- Plane shape: obtained by a two-dimensional plane.
- Surface: May carry characteristics such as shiny, wrinkled, matte, polished, bright and may bring different associations such as perfection, cleanliness or order.
- Colors: May stand out from the context which they refer to through intensity or contrast, being used to highlight certain areas or composing similar areas through neutrality. The visual structure may be used, applying the colors to avoid the monotony or create tension or weight or, for the opposite, creating lightness and fluctuation.

- Order: Elements organized with certain regularity. It can be associated to monotony or security. Some exemples are symmetry and uniformity.

- Complexity: On the other hand, complex elements are characterized by many elements of configuration and with a great information content. They may serve for keeping a certain interest, but they are irregular and cause psychic tension.

For Dondis (1991), there are still three levels of visual representation: The representational, the abstract and the symbolical. On the representational level, the environment's visual details are prevalent, whether they are natural or artificial, exhibiting a detailed representation of the object, just like it is known and expressed in the world. It is a strong and direct communication. On the abstract level, there can be a reduction, to the maximum level, of the visual elements. Such reduction can also be disconnected from any relation with the non-visual data. "In visual terms, abstraction is a simplification which searches for a more intense and condensed meaning" as seen in Dondis (1991, p.95). The symbolic level also requires a simplification but, opposite to the abstraction, this form must be seen and recognized as well as remembered and reproduced. It is loaded with meaning and its simplicity in form makes it easily identifiable and highly penetrating into the mind of the observer.

An image, just as the illustration, always constitutes a message for the other. It may be defined as the representation of something in the line of thought, an idea, and it allows possibilities of interpretation. It is then, a tool for expression and communication. As language, Joly (2007) clarifies that the image establishes itself on the same pillars as verbal communication: It has an emitter and a receptor. Through a channel we can call media, it expresses the

message which is inserted into a context and demands a common code between the emitter and the receptor.

In fashion illustration, the image always comes loaded with meanings that are relevant to this context. In general, concepts that value the being, qualities as strong, outgoing, sophisticated, elegant and alternative are present in the way the illustration is represented.

However, a piece of visual communication can also be interpreted freely, where each individual can associate and establish their own connections according to their repertoire, or it can be a directed and intentional communication, where the receptor must capture the message established by the emitter (SILVA, 1985).

Within the analysis of images and illustrations, we must also consider its function. According to Joly (2007), we can classify it into:

• Denotative, cognitive or referential function: has a clear message of what is being said;

• Expressive or emotive function: concentrates more on the form or in how it is speaking. Therefore, it will be more subjective and might have different interpretations;

• Co-native function: manifests directly the implication of the recipient in the message. It may be an order or a question;

• Phatic function: it only works for testing the channel, checking if it is working. Such as "hello" on the telephone, "what's up", "ok";

• Meta-linguistic function: speaks about itself.

However, we must emphasize that no message contemplates only one function. They coexist with one or another being dominant, without eliminating the role of the secondary function. However, sometimes it may be hard to differ the explicit function from the implicit function and "the observation of the use of the analyzed visual message, as its

social-cultural role, may appear too precious to this respect" (Joly, 2007 p.59). And it is determinant to its meaning.

3.2   Formal-aesthetical aspects

Artistic objects are a special class of objects, in which information that can be noticed in their totality can be found. The set of elements, such as color, shape, material or surface are absorbed together and all this information may be particularly adequate for transmitting complex relations in a concentrated way, through people's sensorial perceptions. This experience of formal elements' sensorial impressions such as rhythm, proportions and harmonies may be appreciated without caring about the content. As a satisfaction of needs, it attends the psychic portion of individuals (LOBACH, 2001); (BÜRDEK, VAN CAMP, 2006).

Csikszentmihalyi e Halton (1981) propose that objects are also forms of psychic energy which interact through action or even contemplation, generating physical and psychological growth. It is clearly noticed that different modes of perception are involved in the way aesthetic attributes are interpreted.

The formal-aesthetic base was established in the research of perception and, in Gestalt's theory, some complex psychic phenomena can be highlighted, from which more than 100 Gestalt laws are described. This organization of sensorial data forms a whole, in the integration of shapes and in the configuration of objects or works. These sensorial stimuli cause certain reactions to the way in which the data is organized and is prone to cause certain stimuli (SILVA, 1985); (GOMES FILHO, 2015); (BÜRDEK, VAN CAMP, 2006). Amongst them, we can mention the one Gestaltists call "Internal forces which organize the process of visual perception" (SANTIL, 2008, p.84). To Gomes Filho (2015), the visual reading is done through the analysis of the steps:

- Units: verifying which elements configure the shape;
- Segregation: separating and identifying these units;
- Unification: analyzing the cohesion of the shape as a whole in function of the balance and harmony;
- Closing: perceptive trend to continuing and closing incomplete shapes;
- Good continuity: presents sequence or flow of shapes. Disposition of the elements which correspond to the natural disposition to follow the others;
- Proximity and resemblance: very close elements tend to form a group because there is not a tendency to visualize them in isolation. Similar elements are easily gathered;
- Pregnancy of shape: harmony, order and balance.

Association and contrast are also ways to differentiate the figure from the background and look for highlights through homogenization or discrepancies. This is followed by the identification, recognition and interpretation in order to generate comprehension.

The material characteristics may be organized in a way to compose a configuration, a well-thought out and planned structure to cause a certain emotional effect or sensation. Images - which configure more pleasant ways for the human perception - may be contemplated for a longer time. Some other elements which characterize this preference are the figure in relation to the non-figure.

Irregular interactions may seem accidental in the inferior levels but, in a more global scope, they come in patterns and with regularity. Therefore, it is the relations between the system's constituting parts that generate an alteration of pattern or the appearing of a property in the tonality which did not exist in the isolated parts. These interactions produce a great flow of information which, without the centralized power, manage and organize themselves.

3.3   Symbolic functions

The symbolic functions of illustrations are connected to the capacity of a signal which, through conventions, transmits intercultural meaning and represents something that is not immediately noticeable. It is connected to the repertoire and lived experiences which take back to patterns established to these meanings. They usually happen in an associative manner, depending on each context (BÜRDEK, VAN CAMP, 2006); (LOBACH, 2001). In the researches of Csikszentmihalyi and Halton (1981), many artistic artifacts are more deeply connected to symbolic aspects than to aesthetic-formal ones. The perception of objects goes through past information and experiences, through a flow of psychic energy and return as recognizable information. And, through assimilation of information, the individual imposes order and meaning.

Status and meaning are attributed to who owns the object or has the opportunity to appreciate it, through symbolic attributes. A symbol may have a special meaning to one or a group of individuals, determining certain relations and social order, as signs of conduct (LOBACH, 2001).

4. EXPRESSION AND INTERPRETATION OF AN ILLUSTRATION

When looking at an image or an illustration, both the reader's conscious as the unconscious are moved. The illustration produces messages and meanings for the receiver, without depending on the author's real intention, within its context (JOLY, 2007). "An instrument of communication between people, the image can also work as

an intersection instrument between men and the world itself" (JOLY, 2007 pg. 59).

With the increase of the means of expression which vary from the pencil, paper and inks to the most varied digital tools, fashion illustration is more diverse in style, expressivity and capacity of communication.

Laura Laine is an independent illustrator based in Helsinki, Finland and one of her illustrations was chosen to be analyzed for being a piece which travels between fashion and art. Besides that, she has done multiple works for big fashion companies such as Sephora, I.T. Store, Harvey Nichols, Pantene, H&M, Zara, Givenchy and influential media channels like Vogue Japan, Vogue Italy, Vogue Germany, Elle, The New York Times, Marie Claire and The Guardian.

Below, on figure 1, Laura Laine has used a well-known theme for her illustration: Botticelli's work: The Birth of Venus (figure 2).

Figure 1: Laura Laine's fashion illustration published on New York Times' T Magazine

Source: http://www.lauralaine.net (acessed in 06/12/2017).

In Botticelli's work (figure 2), according to Salzedas (2001), the figure of Venus, goddess of love, born from the foam of the sea, sails on a wind-propelled sea shell showing her magnificent nudity. On the right, the goddess of spring is waiting for Venus and hands her a flowered blanket. On the left, Zephyr and Clovis, suspended by wings, blow the winds to carry Venus aground and spread roses across the water. At the same time the image represents fertility, the senses and the pleasure, it also represents love and purity, expressed in Venus' prudish gestures of covering herself with her hands and her contemplative look.

Figure 2: 1486's Sandro Botticelli's painting

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/0/0 b/Sandro_Botticelli_-_La_nascita_di_Venere_- _Google_Art_Project_-_edited.jpg/1280px-Sandro_Botticelli (acessed on 06/12/2017).

From this quick contextualization, it is possible to analyze Laura Laine's illustration in its symbolical aspects, through the use of the same thematic as Botticelli's: Venus, Goddess Of Love. However, on Laura Laine's illustration, the

arms are in the opposite position form Botticelli's and do not serve the function of hiding the body, despite its similar gesture: One holds the shoulder and the other the hair over her clothes.

The portrayed woman has the stylized form of fashion sketches: a longilineous and elongated body. She has her eyes closed and is slightly looking down. The act of holding herself indicates introspection, love and self-care. Despite being dressed, unlike Venus, her clothes carry few details and information of how they really are. Her hair is very full and fluttering, highlighting even more the symbolism of sensuality and femininity, also portrayed in Botticelli.

Concerning graphic-visual elements, we realize the line is very present in the illustration. Especially in the clothes which are basically constituted by curved lines, delineating fabric wrinkles and movement. The fine lines which contour and get into the dress are there to describe volume. From above the head down to under the hip there are many fine and winding lines configuring the hair which, by proximity, tends to be arranged in blocks. The organic shape of the line is cylindrical, sometimes more intense, sometimes less. These lines follow a very rhythmic and fluid order, reminding waves, leading the observer around the image and towards the central point which is the face. As for the texture, the fabric is plain and appears to be soft. On the other hand, the shell has a more scratched texture and differences in the color, showing a bright but rough texture. The color blue, imprinted on the dress in contrast with the white background and the grey of the shell and hair indicates passivity and softness. The body is also basically formed by lines, not having a color filling nor spots which characterize volumes. Her silhouette is contoured in a more freely than Botticelli's, suggesting more autonomy and freedom. According to Joly (2007), the use of such traces indicates finesse and

elegance. However, the hair and the shell bring, with great richness of blots, the effect of volume and depth. The texture created in these areas works as a sensitive and enriching experience.

 As for the more specific Gestalt aspects: the illustration has two main units: the feminine figure and the shell, arranged on the first and second plane respectively. The segregation happens basically from the color of the clothes, allowing it to stand out from the grey of the hair and the shell. Despite of this, there is a unification, because the hair is juxtaposed and around the body. In the shell, the repeating elements flow from a central point. The proximity and order configure not only the hair, through lines and rhythms but the structure of the shell in its lighter and darker parts, providing volume.

The visual balance is neutral, because the shell's central point is aligned with the center of the female figure and her support foot is in the center of this base, anchoring the first plane on the second one despite being unbalanced, the image is not static, because it does not have symmetry. the more prominent part of the dress on the right side of the figure, just lie her body which is not standing facing frontally, but slightly turned to the left with its counterbalancing face turned to the right. As for the visual pregnancy, it could be said it is average, because its interpretation demands a certain time, exactly on the organic shapes of the hair and the clothes.

In Botticelli's work there is a greater structure to the figure, suggesting volumes, masses and portraying the "weight" of the body. A more realistic representation through lights and brightness. There is more formality and materiality on Botticelli's painting than what we see on the fashion illustration.

We can also notice the gestural line that indicates the position of the body. This line is very winding, it creates rhythm and suggests motion, indicates flow, grace, something that tends to the ethereal and the divine. The gestural line also makes the observer's eye move. The process of vision suffers the action in response to the analysis of the observed image and the left-right and high-low preferences (figure 3). Still, it is a very well-balanced image in its visual elements.

Figure 1: Gestural line and direction of sight over Laura Laine's illustration.

Source: Image altered by the authors.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Illustration clearly has an emotional and expressive function, since i is about the fashion universe, but shows little of the clothing and a lot of the emotions and feelings the observer must take when contemplating the image. In this context, it is about a much more symbolic than

representational illustration, imprinting its idealized and transcendent values. Picturing a current product in such a classical theme illustration makes the observer go through different emotions than usual; when facing this universe, he or she tries to elevate the fashion status to the divine, something intangible, object of desire and contemplation. It differs from Botticelli's composition, which displays its materialistic and humanistic dimension, because its more naturalistic representation is closer to the sensations experienced by the human beings facing the materiality of the world.

Considering that fashion illustration's role is to spread, communicate, persuade, encourage and reinforce the role of a brand or fashion itself in society, after its decadent past caused by the coming of photography, nowadays illustrations play the role of telling, expressing, explaining, inspiring or affecting as efficiently as the photographic image itself.

Differently of the written or spoken language, which usually separates and nationalizes, visual images unify and communicates massages instantaneously without obstacles of frontiers. With the proper use of visual-graphic, formal-aesthetic and symbolic elements, a chosen and oriented representation can be proposed. Therefore, for artists or designers, knowing very well how a visual message works is highly productive for its understanding and the improvement of its performance.

As a means of propagation, a good fashion illustration will reach its main goal: to better express itself in order to better communicate and ensure it is "felt" more intensely. Besides, having a greater knowledge of the visual language sharpens the sense of observation and allows capturing more information in the reception of the illustrations.

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