

# The pattern of illustration in Owl magazine

Hilary Thompson

**Résumé:** Hilary Thomson a relu pour nous toute la collection du magazine Owl (traduction: Hibou), de 1976 à aujourd'hui. Elle s'est intéressée aux illustrations très particulières, très artistiques pour un magazine d'exploration scientifique. Elle constate cependant que la variété des points de vue sur le monde réel, fournie par les premières années de parution, s'est considérablement réduite depuis quelque temps.

Recently I read some of *The boy's own annual* magazines from the 1940's, observing happily that the illustrations changed with the nature of each section: fiction, poetry, gossip and humour, stamp collecting and nature corner. I was reassured by the repetition of silhouettes with poems, cartoons with jokes and gossip, line drawings with fiction. I was not uncomfortable. Instead, I felt how appropriate it was that every illustration should accompany its rightful genre. As I turn to *Owl* magazine (1976-present), I find a similar reassurance. Though the repetition is less obvious and the illustrations are in colour on glossy paper, nevertheless the recurring pattern of the illustrations in each issue informs the reader of the appropriate style for individual items.

Such a sense of the fitness of an illustration has much to do with the tone of the piece. In any children's anthology (such as *The new wind has wings*) or in collections of poems (such as *Jelly Belly*) the changing pace, the variety of poems, and their individual tones are reflected in the art work. A magazine has even more chance to reflect such changes, for it can use different artists. A poetry anthology, on the other hand, has only one illustrator who must maintain an overall sense of style while also adapting that style to reflect changing moods and voices (particularly of a poet so varied as Dennis Lee). The overall style of a magazine (both illustration and text) says other things to a reader: "I am serious about nature issues", or "feel comfortable with me, I'm just right for your age group", or "I am up-to-date, the in-thing to read", for example. I am sure that *Owl* wanted to say the first of these in 1976 and that it may be leaning toward the last in 1990. Again, however, the choice of individual illustrations indicates to readers the appropriate style of illustration for the tone of different pieces.

The illustrations for the experiments outlined in the scientific item "Dr. Zed" capture the playful tone of an inquiring mind. The two-dimensional

humorous figures drawn by Tina Holdcroft use movement and colour for Dr. Zed's experiments (October 1989). Yet in his first appearance (Summer 1976) Dr. Zed was accompanied by only a few cartoon-style illustrations whose appeal was limited by their being set in the same typeface as other items in the magazine. By October 1976, however, the presentation had changed. The illustrations were more prominent, the typeface had changed to the current use of holographic letters (then block, and now lower case), and the characteristic yellow birds had made their appearance (see figure 1). The item still appeared on white but, by October 1978, a coloured background set off the language balloons, the birds, and the zany antics of Dr. Zed. Bucholtz' illustrations had found a style which remained constant for years. Holdcroft's Dr. Zed may look different, but the same playful cartoon style has been maintained. So we become informed of the right kind of illustration for such items.

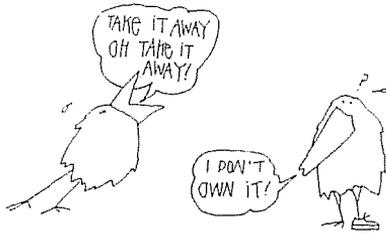


Fig. 1  
antics of Dr. Zed. Bucholtz' illustrations had found a style which remained constant for years. Holdcroft's Dr. Zed may look different, but the same playful cartoon style has been maintained. So we become informed of the right kind of illustration for such items.

Another scientific item with a similar playful tone is, however, not zany but adventurous. "Mighty mites" (Emily Hearn and Mark Thurman), who explore the natural world while shrunk to at least one tenth their normal size, have always been drawn in black and white to capture movement and action. Though the style has changed little since the first issue, in January 1976, the children have grown older and are less caricatured, as can be seen by comparing the captions in figure 2. The change would suggest that we take this item more seriously because it accepts itself, has gained confidence, and does not need caricature.



Fig. 2

In order to inform myself further on the pattern of the illustrations in *Owl*, I chose to examine those illustrations that have a painterly quality; that is, those illustrations which show the reader, through the obvious use of brush work, texture, and line, that their makers have used watercolour, ink, pastels, charcoal, pencil, crayon, or whatever. There is no attempt in *Owl* to confuse (and inspire admiration in) the reader by using realistic photographic paintings such as are found in adult nature magazines like *International Wildlife*. Instead, the art work is obvious because the technique shows. This is essential in a magazine which combines photography, graphic art, and illustrations of the kind described above, and whose aim is to inform children about nature

and science. That children are also learning about the aptness of illustrations for given items is an added bonus.

In the first years of *Owl* such art work is used consistently to set up the featured animal of the month. Photographs and "painterly" illustrations are cleverly combined in this feature. Here (in January 1976 – Anker Odum; September 1976 – Kathy Miller; October 1976 – Anne Mayhew; December 1980 – Olena Kassian, for example) the art work accompanies the text and is followed by a centrefold photograph which amplifies one's awareness of the animal. In all these illustrations the presentation is realistic while still obviously being an artist's rendition of the animal. Anker Odum's work (January 1976) is stark and beautiful, as the sepia-toned, full-page illustration faces the grey and white insets in the text of "The black tailed prairie dog". Already a child has been challenged by two viewpoints of the animal: a distant overview of its



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

life in the prairies (see figure 3), and a more intimate closer perspective (see figure 4) in which the drawing captures the texture of the fur. This presentation of the featured animal culminates in the centrefold photograph in which the golden prairies sun highlights the fur and glints in the eye of the real creature. Both Miller and Mayhew (September, October 1976) provide what are obviously artists' depictions of the animals featured in those months. The former provides a green and white print of a loon and its predators, and this is followed by a photograph of a watchful loon on its nest; the latter provides a grey charcoal drawing on fawn paper, whose lines capture the antics of "The swift fox". The photograph following this drawing presents, by contrast, a still silent fox guarding its food.

In December 1980 the talents of Olena Kassian accompany a feature item

on "What otters do". The brush strokes stand out on the white page (see figure 5), complemented by the layout that allows the otter to emerge, not only from the snow, but from between the paragraphs. Again the matte surface and subdued colours of the illustrations are set in counterpoint to the brightly lit otter facing us with glistening fur in the centrefold photo. Such contrasts of viewpoint, tone, and detail challenge the reader to examine the images closely, to compare them and to reflect on the appropriateness of more than one style of depicting the animal. The attitude is not that of playful inquiry encouraged by "Dr. Zed" or "Mighty mites", but rather a sense of wonder that encourages one to reflect on the many forms of behaviour and the many facets of character of the wild animal being featured. Such changes in the tone of the items and their illustrations allow children to interact with the text and to react to the artwork in a variety of ways. As well as being playful and inquiring, children may be called upon to be thoughtful and imaginative. They are encouraged to develop these qualities further by drawing animals themselves and submitting them for the item "All your own", which appeared during the early years of the magazine.

The variety of artwork was maintained over the years 1976-1987. *Owl* magazine continued to use painterly illustrations for fiction, and for items on space (Mars was featured in October 1976, and the space shuttle in January 1980), history (Pharaohs in December 1979), myth (dragons in April 1978), "amazing" animals (made-up creatures like "Crazy coats" in March 1988 and "Mixed-up babies" in April 1977), exotic settings and animals (the octopus and tropical plants), mystery (Hallowe'en, Oak Island Treasure, and Dinosaurs), and some puzzles and games.

The variety in some of the early years can be amazing: the Hallowe'en feature for November 1979 uses a mysterious scratched style of strokes on black background by Marita Tapanainen for "The magic of the cat;" an amusing and realistic drawing set on a white page of a tiger and a housecat by David Grainger for "Cats up close;" some drawings of cats in motion against faded watercoloured background for "Cat ways;" some fluffy comic gouache-type cats in "Cat chat" by Marita Tapanainen; and painted ink-outlined figures of cats by Kasio Charko in "An Owl mini-book of cats". In one issue mystery, danger, humour, and variations of both size and form are all captured in different painterly styles. Here *Owl* is both imparting information and teaching its readers how to read illustration. Such variety of illustration is, unfortunately, missing from current issues of *Owl*.

In the issue for Summer 1977 Elaine MacPherson captures the exotic setting of the underwater world of snorkeling with her colour pencil illustrations; Anker Odum draws the journey of the Atlantic salmon, and his illustration is printed in black and white and underwater green; and Olena Kassian's dramatic charcoal drawing of a rescued bird precedes the cartoon style of Bucholtz' "Dr. Zed". Ten years later (March 1987) "Dr. Zed" is drawn in a similar

style by Tina Holdcroft; the featured animal (frog) is presented in seven pages of superb photographs (but I miss the change of perspective and chance for reflection that drawings combined with photographs provide); the fiction, an excerpt from *Shadow in Hawthorn Bay* by Janet Lunn, is illustrated in soft watercolours by Laura Fernandez to complement the ghostly nature of the story; and "Mighty mites" provide excitement as they move through their black and white feature.

In the world of children's magazines the concept of the appropriate illustration for the genre of the item seems to be as alive and well in *Owl* magazine in 1987 as it was in early papers like *Boys own*. Here there is not the blurring of genre so obvious to Clifford Geertz (*Local knowledge*) and to those of us who are fascinated when we see Victorian Churches in England transformed into Limelight Night Clubs by an enterprising Canadian, prose poems emerging in poetry magazines, short story cycles taking on the quality of novels, or fiction and fact being merged in news reports on television. (I think one of the best examples of blurred genre is Michael Ondaatje's *The collected works of Billy the Kid*, in which illustration and song, poetry and prose, letters and newspaper reports blend to present an image of this mythical-historical figure.)

What, however, of the current issues of *Owl*? In surveying the magazine over the last two years I observe that painterly illustrations have decreased. Instead, we have more photographs (whose quality has improved), more cartoon-like graphic art and, accordingly, more humour. Fiction appears only occasionally (*Shadow at Hawthorn Bay* in January 1987 and *Little by Little* in May 1988). Unfortunately, both these works were accompanied by illustrations which suggest otherworldliness. In the latter case Mike Carter's illustrations are too sentimental for the text with their pinks, purples, pastels and misty edges. "Unusual" pets and "crazy" animals still appear (March and April 1988) in comic painterly style by Stephen Bernicke and in heavily outlined pastel/crayon strokes by Clarence Porter. The latter's humorous depiction of Baudelaire walking his pet lobster on a leash is sophisticated, clever and burlesque-like.

The overall tone communicated by the kinds of illustrations in *Owl* in the last two years (up to October 1989) is one of sophistication, of humour and of bright clarity in photographs, graphic art, and the few painterly illustrations. Since May 1988 there has been no fiction, except one page by a talented reader (unillustrated – April 1989). The journal has lost its variety: it is more uniform, concerned consistently with issues of science, news, and humour. It is fast-paced and almost frantic because of the lack of variety in its items and illustration. My favourite illustration in these last two years is a painting in hot pinks and bright yellows on a white background of an ant such as you have never seen chasing aphids on a rose bush (see figure 6). It is typical of the bright, clean, sophisticated tone of *Owl* as it enters the 1990s. I miss, however, the pauses for reflection, the changes of pace, and the variety provided by the pat-



terns of illustration found in earlier issues. And this is not blurred genre. It has become one genre, an amusing, exciting, informative science and discovery magazine. The change in title which occurred in May 1980 is reflected in the magazine's current illustrations. Something has been lost in the process.

#### WORKS CITED

*Owl Magazine: a Canadian magazine for children.* January 1976 and April 1980.

*Owl Magazine: a discovery magazine for children.* May 1980 to the present.

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