

In the beginning of my illustration career, I didn't feel that I drew that well, particularly compared to the standard-bearers of contemporary illustration. I couldn't paint and I was nervous about color. I lacked an established style. I had, however, drawn a lot of logos and pictographs as a designer. This probably contributed to my inclination toward graphic and simple forms. I suppose the proverb, "when life gives you lemons, make lemonade," applied here.

Aware that my rendering skills were my weak link, I put all of my energy into expressing ideas. I was trying to tell simple stories that would make someone scratch their head, maybe notice that something isn't quite right. I made the decision not to do realistic illustration but rather conceptual illustration—one that favored abstract and idiosyncratic thinking. I figured that if I could make my work smart enough from the start, I could buy some time to develop and improve my drawing chops.

Eventually, I become so immersed in idea-making that I completely forgot about my beginner anxiety. I didn't worry about proportion, anatomy, scale, or things like the size of my character's head. I believed that since the stories I drew were fictional, my portrayal of the contents could be too. Huge legs, no fingers, green skies, trees that looked like pears. All of these things were acceptable because they weren't intended to be representational. Rather, they were merely symbols in a narrative I wanted to tell. Their distortion was all part of me learning the language of wit.

On the surface, we think of wit as intelligent humor. Like seeing the banana peel that the pedestrian is about to slip on, not the obvious silliness that follows. But on a deeper level, we see wit in forms that resemble visual riddles, or incongruities that intrigue

us and bear investigation. It's putting objects in places they don't belong, casting shadows into forms they don't resemble, exchanging what we expect to see with something contradictory, or stopping time at a moment that beckons us to predict the outcome in our heads. Wit is the welcome mat into the illustration, which begs the question, "what's going on here?"

The urge to incorporate wit in my work is out of appreciation for seeing it everywhere else in my life. I love to laugh and I love the satisfaction of feeling I get from clever repartee. Wit is a key ingredient in meaningful conversation, a more colorful way of seeing the world. It is a character trait I value in people, as it allows them to exchange ideas with a degree of elegant playfulness.

Ironically, wit becomes a more viable approach the more serious the context. It's very rare that I get an assignment that strikes me as humorous upon initial reading. In fact, many are painfully solemn. Often even boring. Those are the very jobs that require the illustration to lift the reader to a place words can't do alone. Thank god for wit.

There is no short answer for convincing the nervous client about the intrinsic merits of wit, or whether a particular illustration will pass the test. I never attempt to second-guess a client or their audience. Nor do I overstate the obvious just to make doubly sure they get it. I rely on my own sense of what is witty for guidance. Drawings that take the least amount of explaining usually work best, while those that take the most explaining usually fail. Making witty drawings ultimately amounts to a practiced intuition, a willing client and a belief that people are smarter than we think. It's a high-wire act that prefers no net.

