A Canon of Illustration

the illustrated word as political engine

Introduction

Before starting this project, I always thought of illustration as just pictures in books or cool designs on posters, but working on this Canon made me realize that illustration is basically art with a job to do.

Unlike a traditional painting hanging in a museum that just wants you to stand there and think about it, illustration has a clear mission. It exists to communicate something specific, whether that's explaining how something works, telling a story, or getting you to feel a certain emotion. An illustration doesn't just sit there looking pretty; it's built to get a point across fast. To me, illustration is the bridge between an abstract idea and a real imagine that anyone can instantly understand.

When I had to pick 15 works to represen the entire history of illustration, I didn't want to just make a boring checklist of " famous art history pieces." I wanted a theme that acctually felt intresting to research. I got really fascinated by how images have been used throughout history as tools to influence people. That's why I decided to focus my Canon on propaganda, power and persuasion.

I chose this theme because it completely changed how I looked at visual history. The works in this Canon weren't made just to be decorative, they were built like engines to move people to action. Some were created by kings and empires to show off their power, some were made to mock their enemies, and others were designed to convince regular people to go to war or fight for their rights.

Looking at illustration through this lens made me realize how powerful visual art actually is. Across 5000 years, the artist holding the carving tools, print blocks, and styluses have always had a massive hand in shaping how people think and how history happens.

Ancient World



“Narmer Palette” - Early Dynastic Egypt (c. 3100 BCE)

The “Narmer Palette” is a fondational template for royal propaganda. Pharaoh Narmer is depicted twice as large as anyone, making state violance and political unifiction look like divine order. Military violence is presented as a sacred duty enforcing cosmic order against chaos, instead of a human choice.



“The Standard of Ur” - Sumerion
(c. 2600 BCE)

“The Standard of Ur” is an early visual contract between state and subject. One side is dedicated to military connquest and the other to domestic stability. It shows submission to the military apparatus and in return the crown guarantees security and social order.



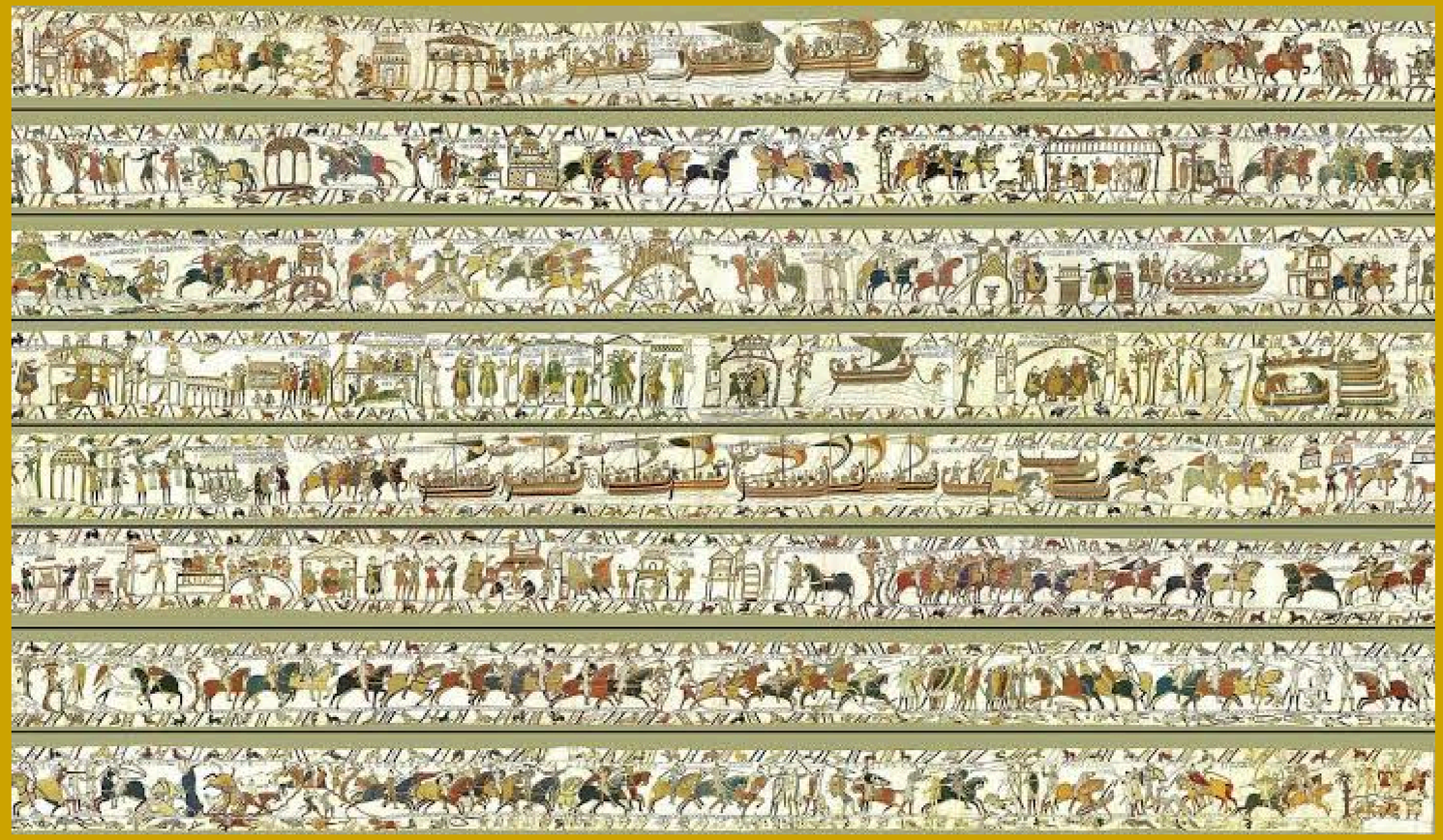
“Traian’s Column” - Roman Empire (113 CE)





“Traian’s Column” is a 190-meter continoas stone scroll depicting 155 distinct scenes of the Dacian wars. The Romans are rarely depicted mid-slaughter, they are shown building forts, engineering bridges, and maintaining discipline, framing imperial conquest as an act of civilizing organization.

Medieval Era



“The Bayeux Tapestry” - Anglo Norman
(c. 1070s)

“The Bayeux Tapestry” is a 70-meter embroided narrative strip relying on storytelling. It was commissioned by the conquerors and it subtly manipulates history emphasizing Harold II taking a sacred oath to Wiliam before breaking it; the tapestry transforms a bloody foreign invasion into a morally justified act of legal restituition.



“The Luttrell Psalter” - England
(c. 1320s)

“The Luttrell Psalter” is an elaborate devotional manuscript combining sacred texts with intimate scenes of rural peasent labor directly supervised by armed bailiffs and knights. It weaponized daily life; by placing feudal agriultural labor directly inside a prayer book, it instructed its wealthy owner that class explotation was a holy, God-ordained reality.

The Printing Age



“The Four Horseman” - Albrecht Dürer (1498)

High-contrast, dynamic woodcut lines creating an inescapable forward motion that trampled kings and peasent alike under horse hooves. Dürer was among the first to realize that print technology allowed an artist to bypass royal patrons and sell visual dread directly to the public, setting the stage for mass media visual persuasion.



"Passional Christi and Antichristi" -
Lucas Cranach (1521)

"Passional Cristi and Antichristi" is a pocket size pamphlet featuring 13 pairs of facing woodcuts contrasting Christ's humility directly against the Pope's luxury. Working alongside Martin Luther, Cranach created a masterclass in visual branding, because it required no literacy tounderstand the contrast, it turned print shops into engines of religious revolution.

The Industrial Age



"The plumb-pudding in danger" -
James Gillray (1805)



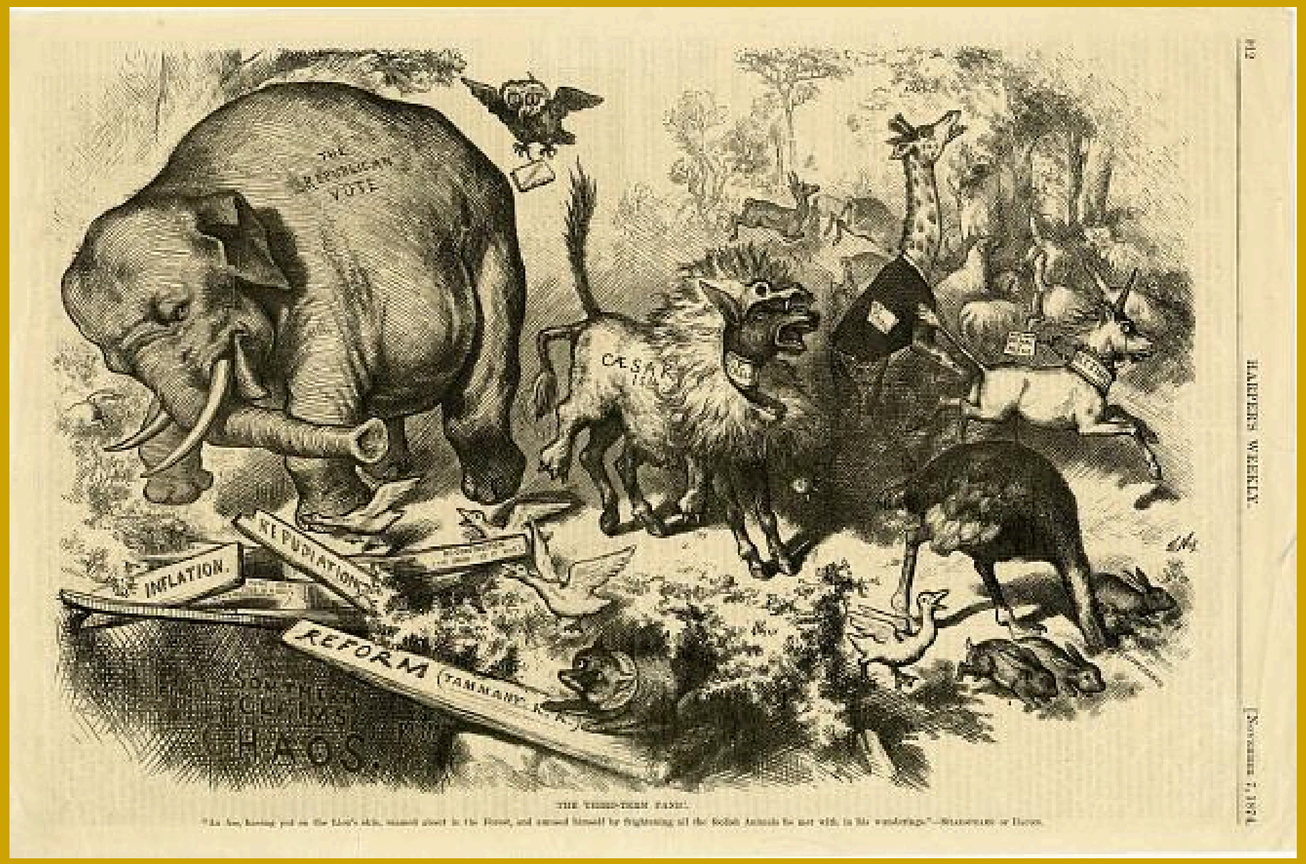
"The plumb-pudding in danger" is an etched hand-colored caricature exaggerating physical traits, it depicts Pitt as a tall, gaunt predator; Napolean as a short, ravenous soldier, carving up a globe-shaped pudding. Gillray demonstrated the democratic power of satire. By stripping away grand geopolitical rhetoric, he proved that a single cheap print could instantly expose the cynical greed behind international war.

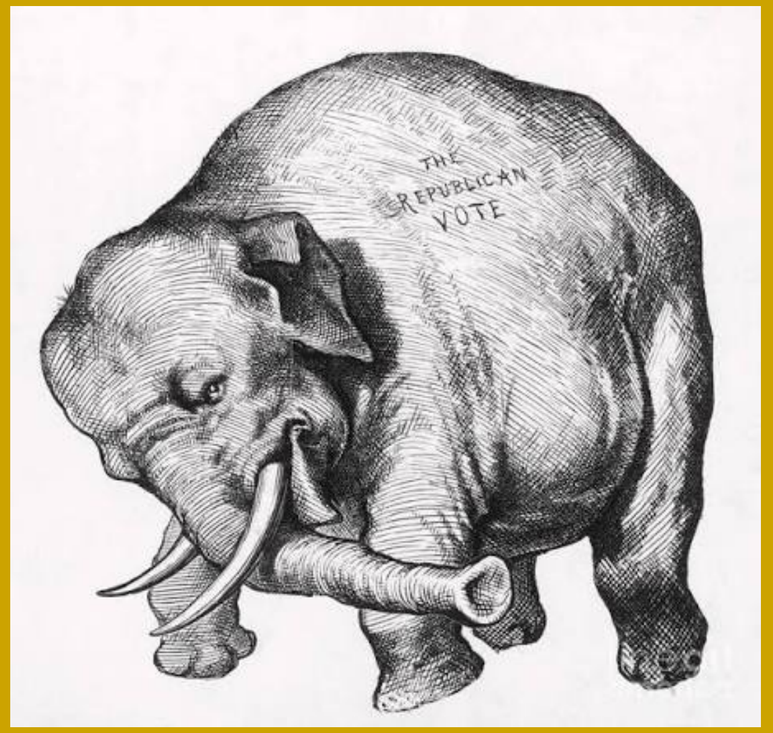


“The Great Wave off Kanagawa” -
Katsushika Hokusai (1831)



“The Great Wave off Kanagawa’ is a low-horizon perspective placing Mount Fiji framed inside a massive wave. It was produced during an era when Japan was facing pressure from Western powers to end its isolationn, the print served as a subtle visual metaphor for nation resilience amidst overwhelming external forcess.







The third-term Panic - Thomas Nast (1874)

“The third-term Panic” is an allegorical cartooning using animal stereotypes to represent political parties and public panic. Nast proved that editorial illustration could build a lasting political vocabulary. His visual shorthand was so clear and impactful that his characterizations became permanent national symbols still used today



“I Want YOU for the U.S Army” - J.M. Flagg (1917)

The 20th Century

Pointing gesture, eye-contact illusion, and a high-contrast primary colour palette that locks eyes with the viewer regardless of where they stand. Flagg’s illustration shifted propaganda from collective national pride to direct personal interrogation. The poster bypasses political argument and triggers an immediate internal reaaction of obligation and guilt.



“Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge” -
El Lissitzky (1919)

Created for a population with low literacy rates during the Russian Civil War, it proved that abstract visual theory could communicate political conflict faster and more viscerally than literal representation.



“Four Freedoms” - Norman Rockwell (1943)

High-detail narrative realism focusing on warm domestic intimacy (a family around a Thanksgiving turkey, a man speaking at a town meeting). Rockwell took abstract war aims and translated them into simple, sentimental scenes. The series raised over 130$ million in war bonds by making a global conflict feel like a direct defense of local neighborhood life.





“The Black Panther Covers” - Emory Douglas (1968+)

Woodcut-style lines, collage, and bold screenprinting depicting working-class Black citizens armed and standing firm against systematic oppression. As Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party, Douglas built an iconic visual language of resistance, proving that illustration could empower marginalized communities to challaenge state power.



Digital Era



“HOPE” - Shepard Fairey (2008)

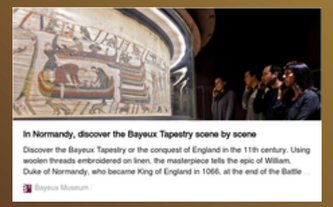
Simplified digital portraiture using patriotic red, white, and blue palette combined with street-art aesthetics. It signaled a shift in modern political branding. Created independently without campaign funding, it went viral across digital networks and street walls simultaneously.

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