
The Olympics of Illustration: An Interview with Mark T. Smith

Written by Steven Heller

Published on August 5, 2008.

Filed in *Voice: Journal of Design* in *Off the cuff*.

What does it mean to be an “official” artist? In the old Soviet Union it meant being sanctioned by the state to produce what the state wanted. In China during the Cultural Revolution it meant adhering to the aesthetic dictates of the government. But as an official 2008 Olympic artist selected by the U.S. Olympic Committee, Mark T. Smith—who has previously created original artwork for Rolling Stone, Absolut Vodka and Chrysler, among others—is responsible for producing a gallery of art to be used as posters and promotional materials for the Summer Games in Beijing. In this case, Smith’s official status allows him the freedom to express himself and interpret this major international event in his own style, with his own imagery. Here, Smith discusses the line he has to toe and the one he refuses to cross.

Heller: How did you get the job as an official illustrator of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games?

Smith: The Olympics project came to me through a series of professional contacts. Several different agents and galleries represent my artwork; it was through these connections that I was presented to the U.S. Olympic Committee and selected as an official Olympic artist.

Heller: What exactly does this officialdom entail?

Smith: I was commissioned to create an image for the Beijing 2008 Olympics. In addition to the creation of the artwork, I have commitments to some promotional related activities, such as poster signings and personal appearances.

Heller: Will your work compliment the official identity of the Olympics?

Smith: The artwork is scheduled to be included in the presentation of the American experience in the Olympic village. I view the artwork as a stand-alone piece of the larger identity campaign.

Heller: Have you ever done anything like this before?

Smith: This commission is unique in that it the first piece of artwork that I created for a truly global market. I have created many images that have been seen by very large numbers of people, advertising campaigns such as the “Absolut Smith” commission in 1996. The Olympic commission will dwarf that audience in sheer numbers and global reach.

Heller: Did you develop a style exclusive to the Olympics?

Smith: No. Within the breadth of my visual language contains a variety of platforms to communicate a concept. This is just one of the many paintings that I created this year.

Heller: Judging from the abstract, symbolic look of your imagery, you seem to have had creative freedom, but how much?

Smith: I had complete freedom to design the image. Because of the consistency and quality of my images, I am always called on to “do what I do”—most commercial projects that I participate in have a larger amount of input in terms of imagery from the client. The image for the Olympics was presented as a sketch; after the approval of the sketch, the final artwork was created, along with a series of related works. The U.S. Olympic Committee approved the artwork without any changes.

Heller: The Chinese allow art to flourish, but within distinct proscriptions. Were you given any guidelines?

Smith: Because the commission came from the U.S. Olympic Committee there was no input from the Chinese government. Any guidelines or parameters were placed by me on the design of the image. For example, I wanted to create an image that was universal in appeal and an image that could transcend languages and cultural divides.

Heller: Should you run up against censorship, what is your plan?

Smith: It would be an understatement to say that the Chinese are in an unusual and difficult transitional period in their country’s history. I expect that they will have many other, more pressing issues at the time of the games to deal with than my painting. That said, if my artwork were censored, I would have to rely on the voice of the global free press to assist my efforts to have a well-earned place at the event.

Heller: What do you hope to achieve?

Smith: I have used this commission as a platform to discuss larger societal issues surrounding the Chinese government policies toward Tibet, Darfur, the environment and the impending global integration of China into the world and its markets. However, my artwork has seldom been created with an activist or political agenda—this

Olympic piece has neither. This commission comes at a time when China is being examined under the spotlight of international media attention surrounding the games. The intense interest in China's internal and external policies has fostered an environment where these topics are being discussed frequently. I hope to contribute to the public discussion on these issues.

Heller: So, is there an agenda for your artwork?

Smith: My participation in the Beijing Olympics was to create a piece of artwork that visually bridged the gap between China and the United States and raised funds for the U.S. Olympic team. This project has afforded me the opportunity to speak about issues that are normally left to political pundits, ambassadors and the like; for an artist—and more importantly, a citizen—to have this platform is a rare occasion. I have the responsibility to speak on topics that I have a strong opinion about and a responsibility to use this time in the media spotlight to be an agent of change. I am not beholden to any Olympic sponsor or political agenda and I am not the spokesperson for any particular cause or movement. I can and do only represent my views on China-American relations.

Heller: What, in fact, is your position regarding these relations?

Smith: I believe very strongly that the United States and the world must continue a dialogue with China. It is precisely because of this that events like the Olympics are of the utmost importance. It starts dialogues where there was none, or it can offer a safe topic to start a deeper relationship between nations with conflicting interests or large cultural gaps.

Heller: There was talk about boycotting the Games. By virtue of doing this art, I presume you are not in favor?

Smith: To boycott the Games would end this dialogue, and boycotts that have been used in the past have never been effective at achieving their stated goals. All we have to do is look at our relationship with Cuba to see an example of an ineffective boycott.

Our Olympic athletes should have the opportunity to represent the country on the world stage—the United States has produced countless Olympic champions that have dedicated their lives, literally, to the pursuit of excellence in a specific athletic contest. These people have spent countless hours, days and years preparing—they deserve the right to compete against the world's best. In some ways these athletes become unofficial ambassadors for the country of their origin. There are so many other ways to effect change on the world stage; to use these Olympic athletes as a pawn in that game would be a shame.

Heller: Do you believe in some way your work will contribute to the dialogue?

Smith: I believe that the primary purpose of art is to ennoble the public. This ethos is always a large part of my commission selection process. I look for projects that will touch as many people as possible. In addition, I believe that artists have a responsibility to communicate to the public on a wide variety of topics. Being an artist means in a larger sense being a problem-solver. Most artists have an unusual way of looking at problems and challenges. This can be a useful and interesting contribution to a dialogue such as this one. I hope that the artwork can be a small example of how two cultures can be interconnected in a productive and positive way, and that this will lead the viewer to think of other manners to make these cross-cultural connections.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of the Designer as Author MFA and co-founder of the MFA in Design Criticism at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press). He is co-author of *New Vintage Type* (Thames & Hudson), *Becoming a Digital Designer* (John Wiley & Co.) and *Teaching Motion Design* (Allworth Press). His book *Iron Fists: Branding the Totalitarian State* (Phaidon Press) will be published this spring.