

## SEEING RABBITS

Discover why these fuzzy little creatures persistently pop up in art and design.

by Steven Heller



On the first day of each month, the promise of good fortune can be yours if you follow these instructions: At the exact moment you wake up to the brand new day, loudly say: “Rabbit, rabbit, rabbit.” A silly superstition? Perhaps. But what have you got to lose? Not tempting fate is one reason why silly and serious “wabbits” (hares or bunnies) are as prodigious in art and design as they are in life. Paul Rand once said that a logo is like a rabbit’s foot—and you don’t mess with rabbit’s feet. But in art, the rabbit isn’t always a symbol of good fortune.

Rabbits serve many functions. There’s the simple aesthetic pleasure of a beautifully rendered animal, as in Albrecht Dürer’s famous “Young Hare” (1502). There’s the humane anthropomorphic representations that are accessible for children, as in Beatrix Potter’s *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902). Rabbits are often cast in comedic roles, like Bugs Bunny, and are commercially manipulative, as in the Duracell Bunny or its latter parody, the Energizer Bunny. They also appear in many myths as the trickster figure (“What’s up, doc?”) who uses cunning and speed to outwit the world’s dimwits. There are dozens of brand-name cottontails—the most famous being Br’er Rabbit, Roger Rabbit, the White Rabbit and the March Hare, to name a few. Speaking of brands, let’s not forget either the Trix Rabbit or the Playboy Bunny (which started life as a stag because the magazine was going to be called *Stag Party*). Then there’s Harvey, James Stewart’s invisible 6-foot-3.5 inch rabbit from the 1950 film *Harvey*. The rabbit-man and rabbit-lady have long histories in literature, theater and art.

Rabbits are indeed plentiful in graphic design—as logos and mascots—and illustration because they provide an almost endless supply of imaginative possibilities. Rendering the rabbit is lots of fun, in part owing to its physical form—the ears especially—and the innate kinetic qualities they embody. Rabbits can be made typographically from an upside down “R.” Rabbits can be cute, stylized, iconographic, impressionistic, expressionistic, surrealistic (jackalope), large or small.

In many cultures, the rabbit is a symbol of fertility. Can you guess why? In Korea and Japan, rabbits live on the moon and make rice cakes; elsewhere, they represent everything from youthfulness to godliness—the Great Rabbit, who gives life to the world. Christian symbology has the rabbit both as a sign of abundance and of vigilance, a reminder to flee from sin and temptation. The Easter Bunny is the king or queen of rabbit imagery.

Originated by German Lutherans, the Easter Hare was the evaluator of whether children were good, and it would dispense the appropriate rewards from its Easter basket. The egg-laying bunny came to the U.S. in the 18th century when German immigrants used the concept as a means to govern children’s behavior. Easter eggs represented fertility in general, but in certain rites, those that were colored red represented the blood of Christ. Brown (and now white) became the primary rabbit hue throughout the 19th and 20th centuries when the image of the rabbit was refined, and the chocolate bunny evolved into an archetype of everything “rabbitical.”

Rabbits are here to stay, their respective place in graphic symbolism assured. Or as Bugs Bunny so eloquently said: “Here I go with the timid little woodland creature bit again. It’s shameful, but ... eh, it’s a living.” ■