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## The Fall and Rise of Illustration: An Interview with Charles Hively

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**Published on** May 1, 2006.

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

*Charles Hively, a creative director, art director, ad agency founder, graphic designer, and sometimes copywriter and former illustrator, is the founder of 3x3, the only magazine in the United States devoted entirely to contemporary illustration. From its premiere in December 2003, 3x3 has maintained the highest production standards in keeping with Hively's mission to promote this venerable genre. Nonetheless, editorial illustration is arguably in the doldrums, with fewer outlets open to a large group of practitioners. In this interview, we ask Hively about the fortunes of his magazine and the state of the illustration field.*

**Steven Heller: A magazine—in fact, a beautiful magazine—devoted to illustration! Wow. At a time when photography or Photoshop seem dominant and illustration seems on the wane, why 3x3? And more to the point, how do you do it?**

Charles Hively: First of all thank you for the compliment, certainly that is one of the points of producing 3x3: to make it something beautiful that designers and art directors would like to pick up, enjoy and collect.

As a former agency art director/creative director, I never really saw the “demise” of illustration and don’t sign off on it being a dead art. (I’m also a believer that print isn’t dead either.) That said, I agree that photography is the most widely used visual medium and has been for some time at the expense of the hand-rendered art of illustration. I blame the lack of use of illustration, however, on our art schools. Students are encouraged to search for stock images and to never consider using art—original or even stock art. Professors don’t introduce design or ad design classes to illustration, only illustration classes talk about illustration. I know when I introduce my graphic design students at Parsons to illustration, the light goes off.

There is an innate appreciation of art (or at least there should be) in any visual communication’s student or professional. After all, we are called “art” directors, not “photo” directors. In my day, we enjoyed drawing, painting, sculpture and printmaking—not just looking but also doing it ourselves. So perhaps there was more of an appreciation of the abilities of the artist then. Today’s art director fails to see the value of how a conceptual artist helps to bring a concept to fruition. Anyone who has tried to figure out a visual solution for a headline or a book title knows how difficult it is to come up with a fresh approach that stuns the viewer. Making an illustrator a part of that process results in much better work.

**Heller: Quite true, but in an era when editorial illustration, at least, is undervalued by art directors and publishers, how?**

Hively: Trendsetters in advertising and design are on the young side; my theory is that a 20-something art director will appreciate the work of a 20-something illustrator. After attending ICON in Philadelphia, I was more than convinced that this younger crop of illustrators could lead the revolution in illustration. They had the energy where many of the guys my age didn't. They had seen the heyday of illustration and knew just how far the fees had dropped and the number of assignments that had disappeared. You could see it in their eyes—they were tired of beating their heads against the wall. The kids didn't see any of that; they saw new ways of introducing art into the dialogue, of expanding what we see illustration as being. When I started the magazine in 2003, the work of this younger group of illustrators didn't have a venue.

**Heller: Where does your funding come from?**

Hively: I often wish I were Steiglitz who came from a monied background and promoted artists he believed in whether the work sold or not. Unfortunately I am not, nor did I ever marry well. My financial backers are everyone who subscribes, buys or enters our shows, or advertises. As we all know, advertising is what keeps magazines and newspapers afloat, and until we have a track record, Adobe won't be calling. We looked at those who could advertise in the magazine—artists, art rep firms, the like. And that's also good for the magazine, as I don't want a lot of awful ads ruining the look. In our Showcase and Gallery sections, you don't realize you're looking at paid advertising, and you're not supposed to notice.

**Heller: Where does the name 3x3 come from? Is this the average piddling space an illustrator gets these days?**

Hively: How cynical Steve! No, it comes from the fact that we produce the magazine three times a year, and we feature three illustrators in each issue, which are written by three fellow illustrators. But the sudden inspiration came on the subway platform at 33rd Street when I was taking the 6 train uptown to meet my daughter for lunch. The type forms in the "33" set the whole thing in motion, and by the time I reached our lunch spot, I unfolded the entire idea for the magazine.

**Heller: Do you think that illustration is being marginalized in print media?**

Hively: No client wants his company to have a bad image or a misunderstood image, so clients naturally gravitate to what they know, what they can see and understand—photography. Clients own cameras, clients rarely own an easel. (Though some of them do have an art collection, and they will be easiest to influence.)

Art directors aren't trained to present illustration as an option. It's much easier to find scrap and do a layout than think about an illustrator doing the visual. How do we change that? The best scenario is that it works from the top down. Clients urge their agencies or design firms to develop work that hasn't been seen before—zig when others zag. When everyone else is doing photography, do something other than photography.

Let me say at this point if I could just figure out a new name for “illustration,” I think we would all be better off. The name illustration is the kiss of death in most cases, much like it was with commercial artists. The word artist still carries weight, but when you tie it to illustration, most eyes go blank. Maybe it’s just as simple as dropping illustration altogether and just calling it “art.” Art and Photography, it’s kinda how it’s thought of in the art world.

**Heller: I accept that illustrative forms—such as comics and graphic novels—are experiencing a kind of golden age, but the single image form is not. Are you using 3x3 as a mission to save the conceptual image?**

Hively: I’m in favor of saving every image produced by an artist, conceptual or otherwise.

**Heller: In giving illustration such a beautiful berth, who are you appealing to and why?**

Hively: As far as the who, I see it there are a number of audiences to influence starting with that young art director up to the creative director, the account director, the marketing director and ultimately the client at the top. I’m using an advertising scenario here because the most money for illustration is to be made in advertising, but the same basic circumstances happen on the design side as well.

As for our specific target audiences, they are art directors, designers, art buyers, educators, students and, of course, other illustrators; clients for the reasons we’ve spoken about; educators so they can tell students about illustration; art directors so they can know who is doing what for who. And ultimately the audience is that client interested in art who sees 3x3 next to Artforum and picks it up. What we’ve seen is that if you pick it up, you want it. No matter who you are.

On giving it a beautiful berth, it is art and should be presented that way. As an art director I collect publications, books, prints, furniture that speaks to me, and inspires me. Most of the illustration magazines out there are horribly designed. The art is not the hero; the design or text, or both, overpower the art, which does absolutely nothing to elevate illustration. At 3x3, we celebrate the art, the artist, the studio, the process—the text is secondary.

I also see a problem with a lot of the free “doorstops” that get sent out to art directors and designers, they’re all ads, back to back. The visual effect is like strip malls with lots of bad stuff mixed in with some really good stuff, but you have to wade through the drizzle to get to the tiny morsels. In 3x3 we only show the good stuff.

**Heller: The production values of 3x3 are superb, yet other than the editorial selection, the magazine seems to be more of a showcase than a critical organ. Unlike graphic design and other design forms—illustration lacks a critical and theoretical foundation. Thus, it’s not taken as seriously as it might if there were more intelligent writing and discussion about the form. How would you answer that charge?**

Hively: Well, my short answer is that illustration isn't even on the radar; it's an art form that hasn't been discovered yet. Or it has been forgotten. Once it is discovered, then I certainly agree that a more critical/theoretical discussion will be important. Varoom from the Association of Illustrators is taking the more critical approach like you mention, more like an Eye magazine for illustration; 3x3 is more like a Graphis for illustration. Our mission at 3x3 is to get illustration back on the radar.

**Heller: Illustration goes through stylistic stages, and some periods are more vibrant and rigorous than others. In the '60s and '70s, decoration was pooh-pooed. Today decorative art seems to be re-emerging. What do you see as the essential character of illustration today?**

Hively: I'm not sure I agree, certainly I saw a great deal of decoration in the work of Bernie Fuchs, Bob Peak, Mark English and that school. Even Seymour Chwast's and Milton Glaser's art is decorative to a degree. And I see both decoration and concept in today's illustration, sometimes mutually exclusive, other times not.

The essential character is personal vision. Look at photography, who does what? How is one photo different from the next other than by the subject matter? Then look at illustration: different approaches, mediums, madness—individual statements, not slick predictable shots. The illustrators working today have the ability to become rock stars, something we haven't seen since the '60s and '70s while the big name photographers are waning. The work looks predictable.

**Heller: I am an advocate of illustration and saddened by its loss of stature among editors who feel photography is somehow more effective (and controllable). If you were arguing with a publisher or editor about giving more space and license to illustration, what would you say?**

Hively: I hear you Steve—unfortunately today's editor or publisher has realize there is something other than photography. I don't think any of us are salesmen enough to get them to change by ourselves. Having them see art in a different context is possible, and swaying just a couple publishers or editors to use illustration over photography can create a groundswell ? eventually.

Getting a client or editor to go out on a limb is a challenge. The way I always sold illustration was to tell the client we were working with an illustrator to come up with the perfect visual solution, and if the client didn't like the solution we would come up with another. I'd sometimes get in trouble because I would ape a particular artist's style for the comp, but for the most part I was able to move them to the real artist. And you would sell the artist as someone who, for instance had just done a New Yorker cover, so you gave credibility to the artist. This worked well. And the client always got to see the final sketch.

What gives this idea the most impact? Who can we get to make our product more noticeable? It all comes down to branding. That's why, to me, the most important movement will come in advertising. This is where we can see illustration in a different context with measurable results, proving that illustration can work in the mass market. Illustration is relegated to editorial now, moving it back into the advertising world will make it more accessible for everyone.

If I could muster the funds I would be doing a targeted campaign, showing where and how illustration beats photography not in every instance (because we know that is not true), but in instances that people aren't even considering now. There was a wonderful campaign several years ago for Match.com, it used illustration—done not by an illustrator, but by the agency's receptionist, but no photo could have done better. In fact the photo would have made the idea trite. Lavalife dressed this approach up with Marcos Chin's work, but you can see the same viability of illustration in those posters as well. Try picturing them as photos and they lose all appeal.

**Heller: Do you think, other than your dogged pursuit of quality, the magazine is more than a model or “feel good” for illustrators themselves?**

Hively: Subliminally yes. 3x3 says illustration is a good alternative to photography. But it doesn't scream the fact. If we shouted at the top of our lungs “THINK ILLUSTRATION,” “USE ILLUSTRATION,” no one would pay any attention to us. Plus, we would sound desperate. But if we quietly present art in a beautiful format, show art directors that art does have a place, engage them with not only the art but by showing the studios of the artists, they will notice the stark contrast to the sterile photo studio. And issue after issue, they'll see the personal statements each of these artists through their diversity of styles, and the light will go off. It's a process and the change won't happen overnight. Hell, we're only working on issue six now. But that 3x3 is having an impact already (even a minor one) is significant today.

And yes, 3x3 should also be a feel-good for illustrators today. It should inspire and encourage and enlighten those who have chosen this field—not for the money, but for the rewards of doing art with a purpose.

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**About the Author.** Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA “Designer As Author” at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition* and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).