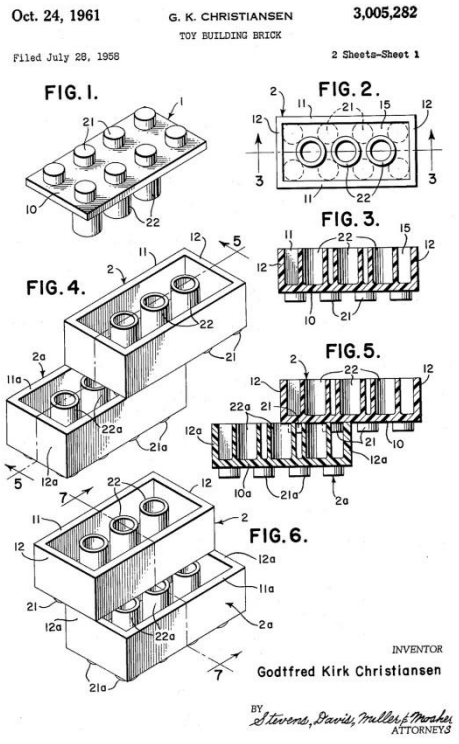
The Story in the Picture: Illustration & Illumination
By Howell Sasser

When I was a kid, I loved leafing through my father's books. He had serious interests – history, biography, theology, numismatics – that tended to lend themselves to thick books with no pictures, but I knew how to find the few that had little sections of color plates scattered through the text. I could identify Henry VIII and a gold daric of Cyrus the Great before I mastered the multiplication tables. The pictures were like old friends that I could return to again and again. Somehow the colors and patterns told a story that in my young imagination was more vivid than anything words might conjure up.

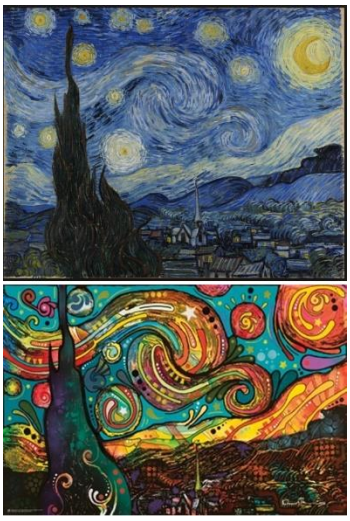
I have "graduated" to my own library of serious books, and amidst my many grown-up preoccupations I have less time to flip slowly through the ones that have color plates. But I have not lost my fascination with the way images add to a story. Somehow it is about more than just an aid to visualizing the story, more than just the floorplan of the mansion at the start of the mystery novel. And that is the point where it is worth thinking about the difference between illustration and illumination.



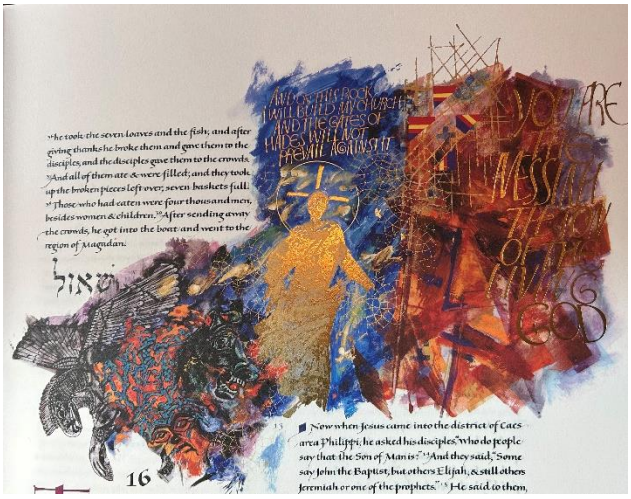
Some things are hard to picture. For example, patent applications often have drawings or diagrams to help define the object in question. The books on my shelf about color theory have to have color blocks, because who can remember the fine distinctions among azure, cornflower, cerulean, ultramarine, cobalt – you get the idea. In these cases, we need pictures to give shape and limits to our imagination. A screw isn't a nail. Oxblood isn't blue. Once we see the picture, we know what we are *supposed* to see. That can be helpful, but it can also feel a little cramped. Think about a time you saw the movie version of a beloved book. Afterward, could you go back to what the characters looked or sounded like in your imagination before?

This is what illustration does. It makes things clear and distinct, but necessarily in whatever way the illustrator envisioned them. Compare that with illumination. There is still an artist and an artistic vision behind the image, but now there is a deeper and more intriguing process going on. We still begin with shapes, colors, lines, and patterns, but now the goal is to broaden not constrain the viewer's imagination.

An illumination can do this in at least three ways. First, it can show what is true and/or most important in a story. As an example, consider the pictures to the right. One is a famous painting by Van Gogh (*Starry Night*, painted in 1889 while the artist was in an insane asylum). The other is an interpretation – an illumination – of *Starry Night* by contemporary artist Dean Russo. In it, Russo seeks to bring out what he sees as the most critical parts of Van Gogh's vision, using color and patterns to draw the viewer's eye to the sky and the mountains. It also might be interpreted as amplifying the inner turmoil that Van Gogh may have been feeling at the time he painted *Starry Night*. (I am grateful to Becca Ryan's blog, *Visual Narratives*, for bringing this pairing to my attention.)



To get a little closer to the Saint John's Bible (SJB), consider Matthew 16:18, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." Through the centuries, this verse is probably best known as the justification given by the Bishops of Rome (St Peter's successors) for their claim to leadership over all of Christianity. But then look at what the SJB artist has done with the verse. There are no bishops or other symbols of leadership in sight. Instead, the artist pairs the verse with Peter's acclamation of Jesus as the Messiah, and shows Jesus standing between the forces of Hell and the face of God. A different interpretation indeed!



The second use of illumination is to mark beginnings, endings, and transitions in stories. Beginnings and endings matter. How we start a story tells us if it is sad, or funny, or heroic. And how we finish it, how we tell the punch line, helps put the whole story in perspective. What better way to say (visually), "here we go," and, "now you know the whole story," than with decoration of the letters and words themselves? Decoration of the text is also a way of saying, "this is important, pay attention!"

Finally, an illumination can help to connect a story with things that are not in it directly. Medieval artists were fond of putting the animals and plants that they knew – or dreamed up! – into their illuminations. It was a way of

connecting their own experiences with the subject of the text. Consider this example from the SJB. In the full-page illumination opposite the beginning of

the Gospel of Matthew, the artist has shown the family tree of Jesus, since that is how Matthew begins. The names show the passing generations, and the tree is shaped to resemble the seven-branch candelabra of Judaism. So far, pretty standard. But also scattered through the image is the double helix of DNA, our own way of thinking about lineage. With that addition, the artist links modern people and ideas with God's plan for salvation.

May your wanderings through the images in the SJB, and everywhere else in your life, be illuminating.