

Illustrated Periodicals as a Means of Popular Education (1868)

Abstract

The text below appeared in the *Illustrierte Zeitung* (Leipzig), Germany's first illustrated newspaper. Published weekly from 1843 to 1944, it featured scenes from all corners of the globe. Edited by Johann Jacob Weber (1803–1880), the *Illustrierte Zeitung* achieved enormous success. Its popularity helps explain why illustrated periodicals, rather than daily newspapers, became the first form of mass media in Germany. When political news was made visible in the form of line drawings and woodcuts, it took on a new aura. The anonymous author of this article defends illustrated periodicals as a means of advancing the aesthetic education of the public.

Source

[...]

It is with no lack of emphasis that commentators have pointed out that illustrated periodicals are steering public taste toward graphic description to such an extent that intellectual education is suffering; that the striving for instruction is being pushed into the background by the shallow craving for the mere satisfaction of curiosity. People have talked about the text and its contents as being overrun by illustration, even dubbing the latter an enemy of any type of serious study.

[...]

Certainly, there are many readers—if they can still be called this—who pick up the *Illustrierte Zeitung* mainly because of the pictures; were it not for the pictures, however, these people would perhaps experience nothing at all of the newspaper's remaining content, since they have absolutely no interest in intellectual pursuits. Indeed, one may well assume that it is only through the illustrations, which appeal to their perception, that their interest is sparked in the first place and their attention is directed toward the descriptive text.

But the mental lethargy of some stands in contrast to the fresh receptiveness of the overwhelming majority of readers, who draw from the illustrations, in conjunction with the explanatory text, the most enriching and versatile nourishment for their intellect—nourishment that has an even more vivid and lasting effect on their minds precisely because it is not offered solely to reason but also to aesthetic perception.

Let us leave aside these special associations, however, to contemplate the question posed above from a higher and more general perspective. The first priority here is the profoundly significant task that illustration is called on to fulfill: namely, to take the most comprehensive approach to popularizing—in the noblest sense of the word—that which science and art was capable of offering only to a minority of privileged minds in the past, i.e., to turn this into the common heritage of the nation. The approach should be comprehensive not only with respect to the subject matter presented, but also as regards the mass of people who receive and absorb this material.

Here, the genuine cultural-historical calling of illustration, particularly of illustrated newspapers, reveals itself—and in two directions at that: namely, in its value not only for aesthetic education, but also for the general instruction of the public.

It is hard to overestimate the usefulness of illustration as an element in the aesthetic education of the public. However high works of architecture, sculpture, and painting may tower above their more modest sister, the woodcut, they lack—apart from the fact that they are concentrated in a few large cities and thus grant deeper enjoyment to only a select number of appreciative art lovers—precisely that extraordinarily effective moment of appeal to the popular interest that makes illustrations so dear to all social classes in all places. If we may describe buildings, statues, and painting as a luxury for the refined artistic sensibility of a few, we are right to call illustration the daily bread of the artistic taste of the people. In fact, the most active servant of these more refined art forms is none other than illustration. It is through the *Illustrierte Zeitung* that thousands first learn of the existence of great artists and their works and thus come to know and appreciate them. Even though the woodcut may not be able to convey the imposing size and splendor of an edifice, the plastic beauty of a sculpture, the pictorial glory of a painting, it still offers the eye the essence, i.e., the thought expressed in the drawing, the pure content of the artistic idea freed from all the corrupting glory of external technique. Here, if one also adds portraits of the artists who created the works and explanatory text—interest in the illustration directs attention to the text, and the text directs just as much back to the illustration, thereby increasing the level of interest in and understanding of it—then the sum total of the sporadic impressions produced by original works of art cannot even begin to compare with the enormity of the inspiration that illustrated newspapers generate among millions from all social classes and in all places.

As an element in the aesthetic education of the public, however, illustration also aids in visualization of yet another sort. On the one hand, illustration turns works of art and the ideas that inform them into the common heritage of the nation; on the other hand, it also serves as the noblest interpreter of the contents of works of poetic art. It does so partly by illustrating their characters and plots in independent compositions, and partly through the agreeable symbolism of the arabesque ornamentation used in initials and decorative page-borders. Herein lies an influence that—because it shapes taste directly—may have an even greater impact on the aesthetic sensibility of the people. Moreover, no area of poetic activity remains closed to the livening up that illustration brings; it affects serious drama as much as naïve idyll, pathetic epic as much as clever song and humorous satire—they all present the woodcut with the richness of their treasures for use in the pleasure and education of the nation in general.

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Source: “Die Illustration als Hebel der Volksbildung,” *Illustrierte Zeitung* 51, No.1305 (1868): pp. 3–4; reprinted in Max Bucher, Werner Hal, Georg Jäger, and Reinhard Wittmann, eds., *Realismus und Gründerzeit. Manifest und Dokument zur deutschen Literatur 1848–1880*, 2 vols., vol. 2, *Manifeste und Dokumente*. Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler: 1975, pp. 669–71.

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