

Past masters, modern use; Art

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Are we mocking our cultural heritage? Or is this art reborn for a new age? Diane Hofkins mixes old and new.

History is not a thing of the past. It's all around us - so much so that we have to stop and think in order to notice it. It manifests itself not just in the ancient buildings many of us pass every day (churches, Tudor shopfronts, bits of old wall), but in everyday objects, like the Florentine gilt-patterned writing paper which is still popular, William Morris wallpaper, or Greek edging tiles around a bathroom mirror.

11 = /Someone with a Monet waterlilies umbrella walks by on the street; another is wearing a Shakespeare T-shirt. We visit a friend, and notice that his art books are held upright by a pair of Rodin's The Thinker bookends.

This month's TES Millennium Frieze panel (at the centre of this magazine) shows two of the most famous icons of Renaissance art: the Mona Lisa and the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Many children will recognise these images without necessarily knowing what they are. In fact, it might be interesting for a class to poll their schoolmates to see who recognises them and who can place them.

These particular works are so universally famous that other artists and advertisers don't think twice about playing around with them. In this century, both Marcel Duchamp and Salvador Dalí painted facial hair on the Mona Lisa. In Dalí's case, it was his own famous twirled moustachio - and he gave her his own eyes, too. She has appeared as a cat, with a wink and, on a recent New Yorker magazine cover, as Monica Lewinsky. She turns up as a fridge magnet (there's even one where you can give her a Groucho Marx nose and glasses), a watch, and clothing. It's the same with Michelangelo's David. You can dress him up and take him anywhere.

Is all this disrespectful? Or is it a way of keeping old things fresh and modern? Is it that these works are so great that they can stand up to this kind of battering? Or are they so stodgy that they should be made fun of? These are interesting talking points. And, meanwhile, your class might have fun subverting some great icons themselves. Imagine putting your own eyes or smile on the Mona Lisa!

But first, picture what the world was like before the age of mass reproduction, when great works could be seen only by the privileged few, and a copy had to be carefully painted by

someone who was a skilled artist themselves. Painting in the style of great artists is part of the art national curriculum, and many children will have tried it and seen how difficult it is.

Now, these works can be seen, quite literally, on every street corner. In fact, both of our Renaissance icons appeared in huge adverts all over London just as we were putting the Frieze together. The Mona Lisa appeared in a lightning flash in an advert for Epson printers; all you needed to see were bits of her face for instant recognition. And then McDonald's had the hand of God passing a Chicken Italiano sandwich to the hand of Adam - some might see this as a travesty of the Sistine Ceiling and others as a witty joke.

But why does art sell hamburgers - or anything else?

David Kisilevsky, account director on McDonald's business with the Leo Burnett advertising agency, says art can be used in many ways. For the McDonald's Italian promotion, they wanted a poster to complement their TV campaign, which featured one of their current adverts dubbed badly into pidgin Italian. "How can we link high impact visual imagery with the food to make the Italian connection, while continuing with the light-hearted sense of humour?" was the question they asked. "That's how we got to iconic works of art," says Mr Kisilevsky.

But other campaigns, in a more serious vein, might use art to imbue a product with a sense of quality, timelessness and authenticity, he says. "If I were selling BMWs, and selling them through the use of the Mona Lisa, I would be saying that it's almost priceless - there's something intangible about them. At the end of the day, there's a value that you can't put a price on."

Art has also been used quite blatantly to imply class, as in a Rover advert of a few years ago, where the car drove past Gainsborough's painting of Mr and Mrs Andrews, an unmistakably snooty couple smugly surveying the landscape of their substantial property.

Caro Howell, education officer at the Tate Gallery of Modern Art at Bankside, London, is not convinced that art in ads is just harmless fun. Just recently, video artist Gillian Waring complained that one of her ideas - having adults talking straight to camera with children's voices - had been appropriated for a Sky Digital advert.

Of advertising's approach, Ms Howell says: "On a facile level, it's taking good ideas and appropriating them to sell a car."

Such use of iconic images "makes the viewer feel smug. It's sniggering humour - 'oh look, they put a hamburger in the hand of God'."

But it is also a form of inverted flattery. Political cartoonists and satirists have often used icons of art to make their points, she adds. For instance, a 1983 photomontage by Peter Kennard places cruise missiles in the middle of Constable's *The Haywain*.

Ms Howell suggests that an image like the *Mona Lisa* has become so familiar that it is almost impossible to look at in a meaningful way.

But if this is so, why does it remain so arresting? Is it just the shock of the famous, like seeing Marilyn Monroe or Jackie Kennedy on the street? Or does its timelessness override cliché? As Nat King Cole sang in the 1950 song by Jay Livingston and Ray Evans: "Are you warm, are you real, *Mona Lisa*? Or just a cold and lonely lovely work of art?" Michelangelo's vision of God sparking life into Adam through the touch of his finger still resonates, partly because it marks the point in history where people placed themselves at the centre of the universe along with God, and because of its tremendous optimism and vigour. It strikes a chord within us, says Ms Howell, because it says a great deal more about aspirations than faith. "There is something exciting and thrilling about touching knowledge and self awareness."

It resonated for Steven Spielberg when he made *ET* - in that intimate moment where the extra-terrestrial's glowing finger touches the child's finger.

The past is not another country after all. It is inextricably mixed up with the present - in the old things that surround us, and in the modern spins we put on them; in the tiles and wallpaper of our homes; in the columns of the Acropolis Greek taverna on the high street or the Taj Mahal Indian restaurant's facade. How many reflections of the past can your pupils find in their surroundings?

* A NAME THAT STICKS

The word icon comes from the Eastern Church, and refers to a representation of a sacred personage which itself is regarded as sacred. The word has come to refer to any work which is so famous that it has become a symbol in itself. An iconoclast is someone who attacks cherished beliefs or venerable institutions. When Andy Warhol turned an every-day object into art, he was being an iconoclast. But now his Campbell's soup can has become an icon.

Computer terminology has taken the word icon to refer to the small symbols on the screen which represent programs.