

# The Relationship between Art and Computer Icons

Janina PUIG, Albert SANCHEZ  
School of Building Construction of Barcelona, EPSEB, Spain

David FONSECA  
School of Architecture of Barcelona, URL, Spain

## Abstract

Can computer **icons** be considered **art**? Clearly, this depends on what we consider to be art and its social connotations. Since the 20th century, a work of art has ceased to be something unique and its historical role has been questioned, particularly taking into account the evolution of photography. It is time to pay attention to new artistic expressions that resolve the problems related to virtuality or appearance, symbolic meanings and ethical messages as essential sources for rebuilding our present.

**Keywords:** art, photography, image, appearance, virtuality, computer icons.

## 1. ART AND IMAGE

A particular understanding of images has arisen from the barrage of information we are subjected to and the fact that the most recent generations have never lived without television and the internet<sup>1</sup>. Firstly, we have the problem of virtual meaning, by which we sometimes recognize the meaning of the virtual sign before recognizing the physical object it represents. Let us think about our economy, for instance, in which instead of dollars we visualize virtual money, a sequence of numbers on our computers or in our bank accounts that are unrelated to cash or wealth of any kind. Secondly, we are learning to consider what we see as appearance rather than reality. The images we see may have been modified and, in fact, most are. In this context, where does the truth or value of an image lie?

## 2. VIRTUAL MEANING

Words related to **computer icons** like 'file' and 'mail' make us think about symbols rather than material objects such as a folder or a postcard.

This is by no means the first time in history that **image** takes precedence over **reality**, as testified by art history. There was a time in Ancient Greece when funeral statues were revered as gods rather than as the memory of a dead person. According to the legend of Pliny the Elder on the beginnings of art (Fig. 1), the first painting was by a woman who sketched the shadow of the man she loved before he went to war. Following the death of her lover, the silhouette was used to build a statue to be placed

in the temple. Over the years people forgot about the young man who was sent into battle, but they still admired the statue as a piece of art—an icon. Hence, art emerged in ancient societies as a document or testament to an event or character and became emancipated as a sacred symbol.



**Fig.1.** The legend of Pliny the Elder on the beginnings of art. The invention of painting, Eduard Daegle (1823) Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

Taking into account the above, can computer icons or silhouettes be compared to paintings by Picasso or Van Gogh? Obviously there are differences in conceptions: while Picasso showed his artist's pride by signing his paintings, Babylonians, Mayans and designers of icons worked anonymously to produce such necessary objects as shoes, glasses or chairs. A piece of art is '**unique**' and its final goal is for us to feel identified with what we see, whereas countless identical shoes or chairs are tools that are developed to serve a function. However, these two objects have a common link in that they are both **documents** that represent a human civilization and a time in history. From this point of view, we can understand the manner in which a previously manufactured object that is now on the verge of extinction, such as the urinal of Duchamp (Fig. 2), can become a piece of art and a unique historical document.

<sup>1</sup> For digital natives, managing friends in social networks such as Facebook, Tuenti and Hotmail is as important as it is in the real world. Thus, digital natives do not differentiate the virtual world from the real world. Puig, J., Fonseca, D.: *Identidad Virtual*. At the 14th Congress of the Iberoamerican Society of Digital Graphics (SIGRADI), pp. 453. SIGRADI Press, Bogotá (2010).



Fig. 2. Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Fountain*, 1917.



Fig. 3. Andy Warhol, *Italian Square with Ariadne* (according to De Chirico), 1982, Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburg.

So far, we can deduce that the **value of art** should only reside in its nature as a unique document. Unfortunately, things are not so simple because this explanation ignores something essential: human perception. In his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*<sup>2</sup>, W. Benjamin talked about the new status of artwork in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the concept of '**uniqueness**' lost its meaning because new technologies made it possible to reproduce almost anything, including artistic expressions. Artists struggle for **quantity** rather than **quality** as a key to bridging the gap between themselves and the public: the more a painting is seen, the more it is recognized and admired. Giorgio De Chirico was probably the first painter to admit to this when, during the 1970s, he copied and recovered his acclaimed metaphysical images of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with a view to achieving greater representation in museums worldwide. Andy Warhol decided to take advantage of this by photographing the painting *Piazza d'Italia* and manipulating it to create a sequence of metaphysical images (Fig.3) entitled "Shadows" (66 variants of a single nightmare), which were shown after De Chirico's death in 1978. In an interview with Achille Bonito Oliva, Andy Warhol recounts his relationship with the Italian painter, "I believe he made copies not only because art dealers asked him to do it, but because he liked the idea and viewed repetition as a way of expressing himself. This is probably what we had in common... What's the difference between us? What he repeated regularly, year after year, I repeat

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin, W.: *L'obra d'art a l'època de la seva reproductibilitat tècnica* (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction). Editions 62, S.A. Barcelona, pp. 52-70 (1983)

the same day in the same painting [...] it's a way of expressing oneself."<sup>3</sup>

To quote Benjamin, the event could be described as a '**symbolic murder**' as the artwork's worth is annihilated the moment the alteration of its copy is published. If we deny the value of both the document and its uniqueness, then we are left with the **immediacy** of the disclosure: the more we see a picture, the truer it will seem. The same occurs with meaning: the more we hear a **meaning** related to a **symbol**, the more we believe that the icon is the true representation of the meaning; or worse, that the symbol is the meaning itself, as occurs with virtual money.

### 3. TRUTH OR APPEARANCE

How can we determine whether the event we see in a picture is true or false? Let us look at the following example:



Fig. 4. Photograph of the Twin Towers in Manhattan.

This photograph of the Twin Towers in Manhattan (Fig. 4) is **picture evidence** of something that once existed but is no longer present<sup>4</sup>. Even if we recognize a historical document in this image, today the event that it expresses has a symbolic meaning, much like the funeral statues in Ancient Greece.

Like art, **photography** has undergone conceptual changes throughout history. In the early years of photography, it was common for people to have photographs of corpses in their homes in memory of their dead relatives<sup>5</sup>. Years later, technical advances in analogue photography made cameras accessible to everyone and images of static people were replaced with sequences of holiday pictures. As amateur photographers, we attempt to capture momentary images that reveal our temporary human condition and we prefer it when people do not look directly at the camera because this reminds us of those ancient mummies that were immortalized as gods.

**Digital development** makes it very difficult to differentiate truth from appearance. The negative of an analogue photograph can offer the key to identifying a manipulation, but this is not the case with digital photographs. Without evidence of its historical and documental worth, photographs are taken as art, which means that they are created as representations like

<sup>3</sup> Stoichita, V. I., *Breve historia de la sombra* (Brief history of the shadow). Spanish version by Anna María Coderch. Ediciones Siruela, Madrid (1999)

<sup>4</sup> Bertozzi, S.: *La imagen digital. Técnica, ética y estética* (Digital image. Technique, ethics and aesthetics). Applied photography workshop, July 2006. <http://www.tfa.fapyd.unr.edu.ar>

<sup>5</sup> Esparza, J.R.: *Fijar una sombra* (Set a shadow). In: *La Sombra*, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, pp.61-63 (2009)

paintings or statues rather than as credible realities. As occurs with art, **immediacy** in digitization has displaced evidential value in photography, which is an awful fate that is impossible to escape.

#### 4. ART, PHOTOGRAPHY AND ICONS

There are similarities between the development of icons and the histories of art and photography. The initial value of the icon was the representation of a physical object, but over time this representation has lost its purpose and become referential. This development is shown in the **abstraction level** of the image: the more abstraction we find in an icon, the nearer its design is to the present day. Abstraction, in the sense of achieving disclosure and immediacy, is needed. In the sequence of directional signals below, we can see the development of a symbol over a fifty-year period.



Fig. 5. The development of the directional signal reveals the human tendency towards abstraction

#### 5. ETHICS AND IMAGE

As Benjamin explains, pictures have a great advantage over text due to their rapid dissemination and expressiveness, which means that the new goal of images may be to communicate political messages. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several regimes used images to voice technological power and superiority as observed in the propaganda of the Third Reich (Fig. 6 and 7). José María Valverde (1926–1996), the Spanish poet, used arguments similar to those of Benjamin when he left his job as a teacher in solidarity with his partner, Aranguren, who was dismissed by Franco’s regime. With the statement, “**There is no ethics without aesthetics**” (1965), Valverde puts aesthetics (images) in today’s context, above politics or religion, as a way of showing and manipulating ethical concepts.



Fig. 6. A special issue of the magazine Der Adler (The Eagle) from July 1939 depicting a close-support mission undertaken during the First World War, in which an aircraft in a low-level dive attacks tanks with machine guns.

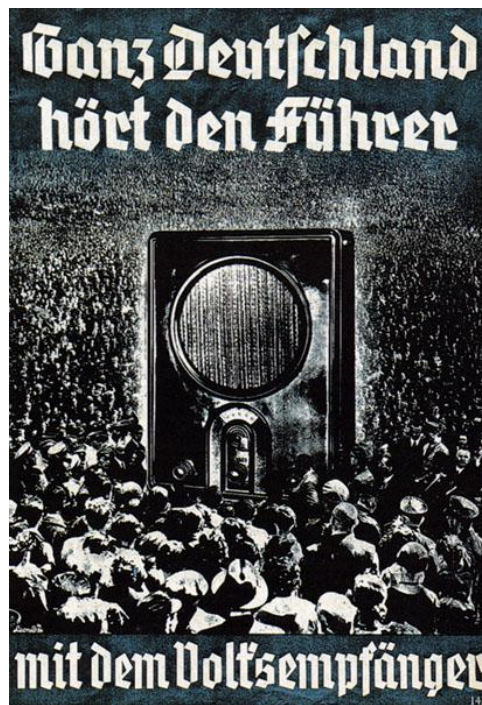


Fig. 7. A cover from 1936 that reads *Ganz Deutschland hört den Führer mit dem Volksempfänger* (All of Germany listens to the leader with the people’s receiver).

If we compare the two pictures above from the Third Reich (Fig. 6 and 7) with those of the republicans during the Spanish Civil War (Fig. 8 and 9), of opposing political ideals, we can recognize the same aesthetics and symbolisms in both. Without the text, the content of the message would be unclear.



Fig. 8. Poster published in Barcelona by the PSU (Unified Socialist Party) in 1937 that reads *Per a aixafar el feixisme ingresseu a l’aviació* (To crush fascism, join the air force).



Fig. 9. Poster published by CNT in Spain in 1937 that reads: Compañero, demuestra tu antifascismo trabajando con intensidad (Comrade, demonstrate your antifascism by working hard).

Every kind of message implies an aesthetic, as envisaged by Valverde. Hence, high technology is used to convey social power, whereas to convey confidence it seems better for a politician to show humility and proximity. These two concepts are shown in the posters above: in the crowd that listens to the radio and the fist in front of the airplanes. People tend to associate appearance with behaviour and believe that certain clothing or hairstyles can determine whether a person is trustworthy. Would you hand your money over to a bank worker wearing a torn t-shirt?

## 6. ETHICS AND ICONS

As we have seen, the aesthetics of **political discourse** can be associated with a historical moment in time. The opposite process is also true: a historical moment can be determined by taking into account the aesthetic decisions made. This could be the **new value** of images as a document or testament, a means by which to tell something of our social history. Let us see whether this artistic statement is valid with computers icons; if it is, then these images should reveal a social or political moment linked to the expressed message.

One aspect that involves historic licenses in any created image is the source of inspiration that reveals social and/or political power. The new meaning of modernity increasingly lies in connectivity and information.



Fig. 10. Historical displacement of inspirational sources to convey technological power.

The displacement of our interest towards communication infrastructures can be observed in a second aspect: the rapid change in their symbolic references, which are forced to adapt to the **progress** of the represented object. For instance, in the following sequence of historical representations of the telephone, the middle icon is understood to be a non-self entity, straddling between the other two (traditional telephone and cell phone).

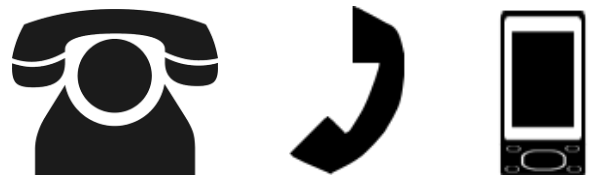


Fig. 11. The different representations of a phone in the past 20 years.

Iconic history, like art, reveals social evolution. Immediacy is now considered to be much more important than quality. For instance, the current tendency is to increasingly shorten the life of mobile phones, forcing us to change them every year.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

The mission of art is to represent historical events and people's responses. According to this point of view, computer icons are indispensable for understanding our social moment. These artistic expressions are created for maximum disclosure, which means that immediacy and adaptation are part of their founding statements.

To quote Zygmunt Bauman, today's world is unstable and society is placed on a '**liquid stage**'<sup>6</sup>, where people no longer trust the solid values of family, fidelity or home. On the contrary, everybody needs to adapt their personal appearance to continuous change and withdraw the ideals of consistency or stability in order to survive. It is a case of action versus contemplation, in strong contrast to past social struggles or movements as the present focuses on **individualism** and **self-affirmation**. Answers are explained using modern designs or symbolic messages and people need to connect with each other through machines, which paradoxically enable us to be alone.

<sup>6</sup> Bauman, Z.: *Liquid Life*. Polity Press, Cambridge (2005)

## REFERENCES

1. Benjamin, W.: *L'obra d'art a l'època de la seva reproductibilitat tècnica* (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction). Ediciones 62, S.A. Barcelona, pp. 52-70 (1983)
2. Stoichita, V. I.: *Breve historia de la sombra* (Brief history of the shadow). Spanish version by Anna María Coderch. Ediciones Siruela, Madrid (1999)
3. Bertozzi, S.: *La imagen digital. Técnica, ética y estética* (Digital image. Technical, ethical and aesthetic) Applied photography workshop, July 2006, <http://www.tfa.fapyd.unr.edu.ar>
4. Esparza, J.R.: *Fijar una sombra* (Fix a shadow). In: *La Sombra*, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, pp. 61-63 (2009)
5. Bauman, Z.: *Liquid Life*. Polity Press, Cambridge (2005)